

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

JACK McLAREN

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MY CROWDED
SOLITUDE



THE TREE WITH THE INITIALS AND THE DATE.

[Frontispiece

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE ¹⁹¹¹⁻¹⁹¹⁹

By JACK McLAREN, *Author of*
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MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

CHAPTER I

THE SEARCH

ON a mighty blaze on a mighty tree are cut two initials and a date. The initials are mine, the date is when I began an eight years' lonely residence among the most backward race of people in the whole of the tropical South Pacific, which is a place where backward peoples abound.

This experience was mine primarily because in the midst of an adventurous South Seas wandering the urge came upon me to settle awhile. It was not that I was weary of the South Seas, for I loved them. Nor was it that I was weary of adventuring, for youth was mine, and to my particular kind of youth adventuring was Life. It was merely that I was weary of adventuring in many places and desired greatly to adventure in one place for a change.

But for long I saw no means of satisfying this urge. There was always something—usually financial—to hinder me. Indeed, the number and force of circumstances apparently especially designed to prevent a wandering young man giving up his wandering was astonishing. Then one day I came again to Thursday Island, the place of pearls and pearl-shell which sits astride the strait that makes of New Guinea and Australia two separate lands, and encountered a man with a proposal which suited me exactly.

It was that we should establish a coconut-plantation at Cape York—that is to say at Australia's uttermost north, the apex of that tremendous and almost completely unknown peninsula which, after half a thousand miles of paralleling the mighty Barrier Reef, thrusts up amid the islands of Torres Strait and towards New Guinea like a pointing finger.

This great land, it appeared, had a peculiarity all its own. It was a South Sea land without coconut-palms—insignia of a South Sea land. You could sail its shore for days, said my friend, for weeks if you liked, and never once see a palm. The beaches were edged instead by jungle and open forest and tall, indigenous grasses. He'd seen them often enough—he'd been much up and down that coast—and every time it had somehow seemed strange. As you went along you kept looking ahead for the green of clustered palms, for sight of tall boles all bent with the wind. It didn't seem right that there shouldn't be any, for you were sailing all the while a land washed by the waters of the Coral Sea and fanned by trade-winds and inhabited by natives—a land with all the features of a true part of the tropical Pacific, except the most outstanding.

But, said my friend, there was no reason why the palms should not be made to grow there. No reason at all. He'd given a deal of thought to the matter, considered all the details, garnered information wherever he could. He was sure that with discretion and judgment it could be done. The great land lay squarely within the latitudes coconuts favoured. It was affluent in the matter of rainfall and, so far as was known, fertility of soil. It was not within any area of cyclonic or other palm-destroying winds. Indeed, had it been tenanted by agriculturists like the Solomon islanders or Papuans, instead of by Australian aborigines—Palæolithic nomads

who grew nothing whatever, but lived by the chase—its beaches would have had their miles upon miles of palm-groves. A fine plantation indeed could be made there! enthused my friend. There would be all manner of advantages. The most suitable site could be had for the choosing. In a land so great suitable sites would be innumerable. The labour of the natives would cost little. They would be eager to work and thus obtain European foods and goods. A man would labour a whole month for a few shillings' worth of "trade" goods. They were a poverty-stricken lot, who seldom saw strangers, and would jump at a chance like this. What did I think of the idea? I had had experience of coconut-planting, in New Guinea and elsewhere, and if I would become the working partner, he would provide certain necessary monies.

But it would be no easy task, he warned when I promptly agreed. I should consider the disadvantages involved. He didn't want me to begin the task only to abandon it unfinished. That would be no good to either of us. I would have to live there eight years. It would be like going into a kind of exile, cutting myself off from the rest of the world, and all that. There would be hardships of various kinds, and perhaps danger from natives. From all accounts, the natives were a pretty wild and savage crowd. And it would be difficult to teach them plantation work. Then there was the loneliness. I would see white men only at long intervals. Loneliness would be hard to stick in such a place. . . .

But this was just the kind of life I craved. Also it came to me that there would be something romantic in being the first to plant coconuts in so great a land and thereby bring it into its own. I felt I could not begin quickly enough. A day or two later all arrangements were made and I boarded a small sailing craft and set

forth to spy out the land in general and a spot suitable for the venture in particular.

It was not an imposing craft for a voyage of discovery, being a craft dirty, ill-found and worse-kept, even to the matter of sun-cracked decks and straggling rope-ends and blistered paint-work. Also it had been used in the fishing of trepang. Trepang is a sea-slug of repulsive appearance when alive and of great malodourness when smoke-dried for export as a Chinese edible; and the malodourness had impregnated itself into the very timbers, so that never for a moment was I free from it.

Further, the captain was a thin-faced, yellow-eyed Cingalese who spent much of his time in the cabin dallying in turn with an opium pipe and a newly acquired native wife with a tendency to obesity; and the smell of the opium mingled with the smell of the trepang and produced a third smell unlike but viler than either of its components.

Again, the crew, of various crossed breedings, with black predominant, had before leaving drunk much of Thursday Island's strange liquors and now drank more on board, to the displaying of the several savage characteristics of their black heredity incongruously mingled with the vices of their white heredity.

But these things mattered little to me. Too often before had I seen their like. As trader, gold-seeker, pearler, recruiter of plantation labourers, as a general South Seas Odysseus, the crudities of life had been commoner to me than the refinements, and I had become accustomed to them. Besides, the real significance of the venture burned within me. I was setting out to discover a new possibility in a new land. It was like setting out to discover a new land itself. I was a pioneer, an explorer, a Columbus—a Columbus in a trepang craft.

It was the height of the trade-wind season, and all

through that first day we lay up to the blustering seas, sailing tack for tack across the breeze, taking four miles sidewise to gain one of forward progress; and at sundown we anchored behind a tall and rocky island which kept from us both wind and sea; and here the drinking of the crew-boys was ended, for soon after dark they went into an alcoholic sleep and the thin-faced captain quietly confiscated their store of liquor—to their tremendous discontent when they awoke, and to their accusing one another of having stolen it.

With the first of the sunrise the anchor came clanking up—a sunrise which filled me with the joy of life, so clear and fresh and warm was it—and on rounding the sheltering island's shoulder we fell in with a score or more luggers working a bed of pearl-shell, all of them bright, brisk craft, tall of mast and wide of sail. Everywhere was colour, small flecks of it, great splashes of it, colours that ranged from the scarlet of a loin-cloth to the broad gold-and-blueness of the sea. In the low rays of the sun the luggers' sails were white as paper, the green of their rails the green of jade, the gleaming of their protecting copper, just above the water or awash, the gleaming of wet gold. On each vessel's either bow, so placed that it was as an eye, was a distinguishing disc of blue, or white, or crimson. The red wheel-handles of the divers' air-pumps were as flashes of reflected flame, and the nude backs of the men who turned them bits of bronze. All about the smoothness of the sea were bursting bubbles of silver—betrayers of the divers' positions on the bottom—and from each vessel's rail an air-pipe and life-line trailed overside and down like a thick grey snake and a thin one incredibly long.

I remarked to the captain's wife to the effect that this was a sight worth while; and she agreed with me, and with her fat hand pointed to various small colours

I had missed, and showed me a cloud which she said was shaped like a stout woman's breast. But her husband shook his fist at the vessels and spat voluminously.

"Japaneel!" he said. "All bloody Japaneel!"

He didn't like Japanese, he told me later. They'd got hold of all the pearling. One time there was hardly any of them in the Strait; but now they were all over the place. They'd got hold of all the luggers, and an outsider hadn't a chance of getting one. He'd tried and tried. He was a good diver; he'd dived for various lugger-owning firms years ago, and done well at it, too, what with the pearls he found and forgot to hand over, and all that. There was a lot of money in pearling, if you had a bit of luck. But he couldn't get a lugger. The Japanese blocked him every time he tried. So, he had to take on trepanging. It wasn't much of a game, trepanging. There was too many boats at it. The trepang was getting too hard to find.

"It's harder work than pearlin'," he said. "Not only is there a lot of divin' to get the trepang, but afterwards their guts have to be taken out, and the trepang boiled and smoked; and we've got to go ashore every now and then and cut heaps of wood for the smoking and boiling; and the fire's got to be looked after; and what with the smokehouse and the boiler there ain't any room on deck, and everything's stinking like hell and—and—oh! b—— them Japaneel!"

At noon we sighted low down against the sky a long grey smear which the captain said was the Peninsula's western shore; and that afternoon we lay along it but did not stop, for the land so far as could be seen from the sea was mainly steep-sided hills covered with tall, coarse grasses which I knew from experience to betoken agriculturally unfit soil. So on we went, that day and the next, winding between sandbanks and reefs and islands,



SOME ISLETS OFF CAPE YORK.

on past a hill where stood a telegraph station which by linking a submarine cable to a land-line of exceeding length joined Thursday Island and its pearlers to the rest of the world—a single, lonely-looking building, it was, on tall piles, with a wide veranda which had at its corners loop-holed shooting shelters of spear-proof galvanised iron. Then we came to the Peninsula's utmost extremity, and after a stout battle with an adverse tide rounded it and made through an island-bordered pass where jungle-clad cliffs stood steeply to the water's edge and made of the sea a place of purple shadows with light in them.

It was the pass through which Captain Cook sailed his tiny inadequate *Endeavour* and thereby established definitely that Australia was not joined to New Guinea; and I thrilled absurdly to the knowledge that a century and a half later I, also on a voyage of discovery, should be sailing in a tiny inadequate craft through this selfsame pass, should be looking at scenes unaltered as when that prince of navigators looked at them.

I remarked on this to the captain. But he wasn't at all impressed. He didn't think Captain Cook had any particular virtues as a navigator. There were many better, he thought, and to prove it gave me the names of some of them; whereupon I discovered he thought I had referred to a remarkably dissolute trepanger of his acquaintance, he never having heard of the *Endeavour* and having no conception whatever of what the term a century and a half conveyed.

Nor when I explained was he very greatly impressed. In coming safely through this maze of then uncharted shoals, he said in effect, the *Endeavour* no doubt performed a worthy feat; but only a week or two ago these same waters had seen one absolutely remarkable. Whereupon he related the adventure of a pearling cutter—an adventure which recalled, even in the matter of nomenclature,

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the adventure of the *Marie Celeste*, the sailing-ship which was found adrift in the Atlantic, abandoned intact and with all sail set and nothing to indicate what had happened.

The cutter was called the *Marie Eusebia*, and one day in a calm at the farther limit of the strait her native crew of three went overside for a swim. Suddenly a breeze sprang up and filled the sails and the vessel was off towards the skyline before the men in the water realised what had happened. The men were picked up later none the worse, but by then the cutter was well over the curve and out of sight, and it was only after an extended search that the runaway was found on the eastern side of Cape York. She was quite unharmed, for manless and all as she was, she had travelled more than a hundred miles to *windward*, through a most tremendous tangle of reefs and sandbanks and islands, where there were scarcely two consecutive half-miles of open water—and missed them all!

This region had a very definite interest for my captain. As we sat on the rail, with the vessel swimming so smoothly to the last of the day-wind as to make scarcely a ripple, he told me of it. It concerned the wreck of the *Quetta*, a British-India passenger steamer of a full ten thousand tons which hereabouts one calm and moonlit night so ripped out her bottom on an uncharted rock that within five minutes she plunged completely under, to the losing of some hundreds of lives. My captain was then a pearl-diver and soon after the disaster went down to the vessel in the dress.

He told me he would not care to see again what he saw down there. He didn't think he could stand it, what with the opium and all. The passengers had just started a dance, and there was an awning along the deck, all hung with red electric globes and blue ones and flags and

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The Pearl
Diver at the
wreck

things, and the ship was sitting straight up on the bottom, like she was sailing along. Some of the people was caught up under the awning. The tide was making them bump it. You'd have thought they was alive, the way they moved. There was a lot of women. Beautiful, some of them, and young, too. There was a man with a cigar in his hand. He had a round face and his eyes was open, staring-like, and the cigar was all in loose bits, like bits of paper. All sorts of people, and they was all bumping the awning as if they was trying to get up; and some of their faces was like they was asleep and happy, and some was frowning, and some looked frightened. There was a girl with her dress washed up over her head like she'd put it there so's she couldn't see them others. . . .

My captain gave a little shiver, glanced at the land for a bearing and gave an order to the steersman. Then when the vessel had swung down-wind a little he extended a long brown finger over the side and said in a tone which had in it more than a little of awe, that we were now directly over the spot where the *Quetta* still lay and that if I cared to look down steadily a while maybe I would see something of the grey uncertain shadow which was her hull. But somehow I did not care to look; and my captain with a nervous laugh rose and went down into the cabin, whence came presently the acrid scent of burning opium.

The finding of a site suitable for the establishment of a pioneer coconut-plantation was not the simple matter my partner and I had thought. Despite that for many weary days I sailed up and down the Peninsula's eastern shore, making inspection of every likely spot, never once did I come across the combination I sought—arable land and shelter for shipping, though these qualities existed separately in exasperating numbers. Indeed, never before

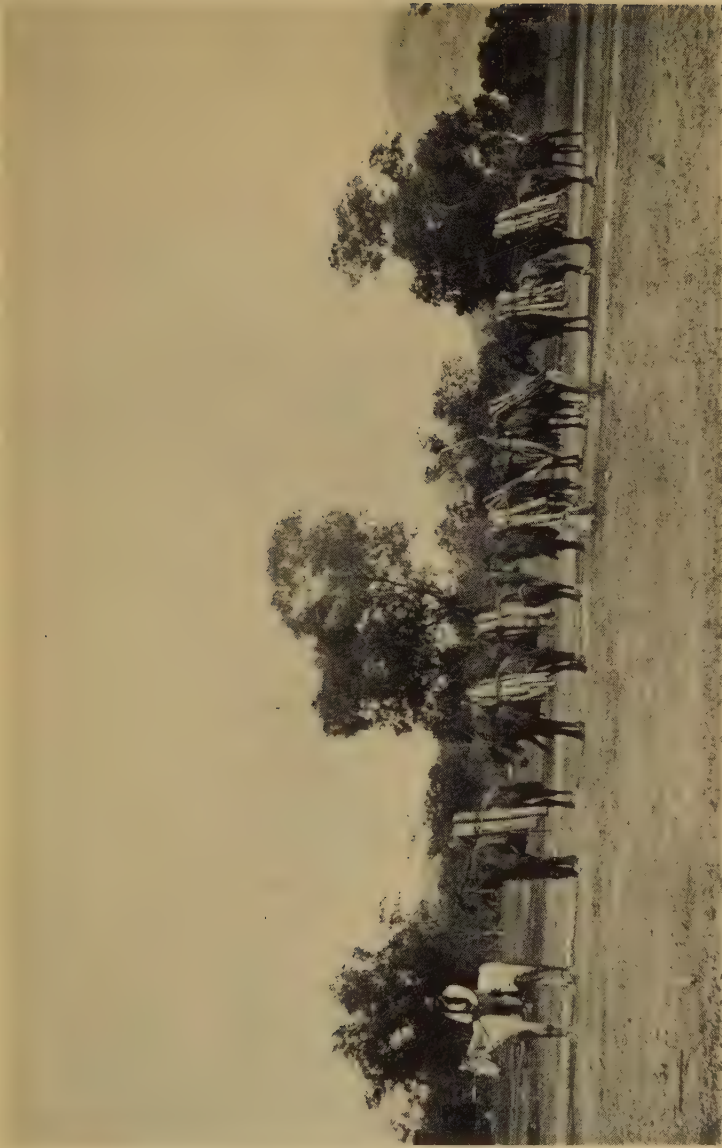
Choosing
for a
plantation

had I seen so many fine harbours edged by soil of absolute barrenness, and so many unsheltered beaches edged by land which would grow anything at all. To me the outstanding feature of the country was a remarkable dearth of suitable plantation sites. It was extremely discouraging.

And to add to the discouragement there was the opinion of the crew that the land wouldn't grow coconuts anyway. If it would, why were none there now? they asked, thereby revealing the conservative native belief that what never was never could be. There must be something wrong with the land, they said decisively—to all of which the captain's wife nodded agreement and one evening, greatly daring, warned me privately that my venture was a foolish one; and then, fearing my displeasure and as something in the way of conciliation, took from behind her ear a cigarette of crude tobacco rolled in dried banana-leaf and placed it between my lips and lit it, striking the match on the hardened sole of her foot.

And to add further to the discouragement there was the opinion of a white man I met on the shore of one of the exasperatingly unfertile harbours. He was a sandalwood-cutter who had brought to the coast, for shipment to China for use as joss-sticks and as fuel for the everlasting temple-fires, a quantity of the scented wood on the backs of a string of horses. It was a damfool idea—growing coconuts, he said. They took too flaming long to come into bearing. Seven years was a hell of a big slice out of a man's life. And the damn' things mightn't bear in this country at all. I might have all my labour for nothing. I was taking a big risk. Sounded a mug's game, if you asked him. He'd rather have sandalwood-cuttin'. Of course, sandalwood-cuttin' had its drawbacks. It wasn't all beer and skittles, sandalwood-cuttin'. The wood took a lot of finding, and the bloody Chinks

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A SANDALWOOD PACK TEAM.

had a way of rigging the market and making prices come down. Still, a man had some sort of an idea where he stood most times. If he was me he'd get this coconut-growing nonsense out of his head and go in for something that gave a more certain return. And a quicker one.

And to add to the discouragement still further I had in this region a taste of what it was to be absolutely alone. It was on an uninhabited island, called Turtle-head Island, which lay close to the coast and which I determined to explore while my captain took his vessel to a place where a trepang cargo awaited him. As the sails went up and the vessel fanned out from the anchorage, there came the voice of my captain calling that within three days he would most faithfully return. I think I scarcely heard him. My first experience of being utterly alone had aroused in me a sensation I had never felt before or have ever felt since.

*First
Alone*

It was a sensation of smallness and frailty. It was as though everything but me was big and strong. The sea was a thing of immensity and power. The hills of the two-miles distant mainland were mighty and rugged. Never had I seen hills so mighty and rugged. The trees about the beach were thick of bole and tall. They had resisted the vicissitudes of maybe a hundred years. While I—I was a thing of but a few score pounds of bone and muscle and flesh which even the most trifling mishap could for ever destroy. As I stood there on the beach beside the little heap which was my sufficiency of arms and rations, I felt more incompetent than ever I had felt in my life.

Then on rounding a corner of the beach I discovered a native hut—a preposterously tiny hut built of bark and amazingly crooked saplings, with two sides only and a most inadequate roof—and at once the sensation of

*First
Native Hut*

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

smallness and frailty left me and the hills and the trees and the sea lost their seeming superiority. My interest centred on this thing of human association. Here was a link with the world of men, something I appreciated and understood; and with a curious ecstatic pleasure I fell to wondering who was its owner and why he had chosen to live in a solitude such as this, natives being gregarious in the extreme. Then I put the matter from me for the time and gave myself to examining the island.

It was an island large for those waters, being some twelve miles round, and at first I thought I had discovered the place I sought, for on the shore of the well-sheltered harbour was an area of arable land. Then I found it was as unsuitable as any of the other places I had inspected—the area of arable land was far too small. It was another disappointment; but by now I was becoming accustomed to disappointments, and complacently enough I sat in my tent beside the empty hut and awaited the end of the three days and the trepang-vessel's return.

But at the end of the three days the vessel did not come, nor did she come at the end of a week, nor of two weeks. At first I did not greatly care. The tropics were the land of lots of time and I was a child of the tropics. There was always to-morrow. Anything might happen to-morrow, and it didn't much matter if it didn't.

Besides, I was now enjoying this my first taste of solitude. There being nothing else to give it to, my attention was given wholly to Nature and natural things. Hitherto I had carelessly generalised with regard to Nature. Now I particularised. I noted individuals and individual characteristics. A bird, from being merely a member of a certain species, became a thing of peculiarities which made it interestingly different from other birds.

I found that no animal was exactly the same as its fellows, any more than no man is exactly the same as his fellows. Even a tree, I discovered, was not just one of a thousand trees, but an individual with a history of its own. These things intrigued me so greatly that the days passed quickly.

But at length my interest in things human revived. I became anxious at the trepang-vessel's failure to return. I put myself on short rations, for I had brought food sufficient only for a week, and abandoned the discovering of individual characteristics in birds and things for watching from the seaward beach for the returning vessel's sail.

In the course of my adventuring in many places I had more than once been made aware of the fact that in the face of a pressing human need beauty lost much of its charm. But as I watched from that seaward beach it seemed to me that never had I been aware of it so acutely as now. I knew that the great blue spread of the sea was a great blue spread of loveliness, that the infrequent cloud-shadows upon it and the white flecking of the waves were things of impish beauty. But I knew it only as something by the way. The thing that impressed me most about that sea was its emptiness. Never, I thought, had I seen a sea so thoroughly devoid of ships. Not only was there no sign of the sail I sought, but there was no sign of any kind of sail. The disassociation of that sea from things human was astoundingly complete. Sometimes at the end of a long day's watching I thought of it as a sea that had never been sailed at all, and never would be sailed, a despairingly virgin sea. Its beauty meant to me nothing at all. I was a hungry man. I was a starveling in a palace of lovelinesses.

My anxiety developed to serious alarm. I put myself on shorter rations still, having one meal daily and only

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

half a meal at that. On the seaward beach I built a great stack of dry, dead wood and all day stood by ready to ignite it as a signal of distress should a sail perchance appear. But the sea retained its dreadful emptiness. Its beauty began to mock me.

Then, on the twelfth evening I returned to the tent to see approaching across the harbour an object of indeterminate shape which for a time puzzled me, and which at length I saw was a canoe. Eagerly as a castaway of fiction, I ran to the water's-edge and awaited its coming.

There were three natives in it—two women and a man—each with skin of a dull dead blackness and short curly hair lying exceedingly close to the head. Of clothing the man wore nothing at all, and one of the women was clad in a garment that left her naked from the waist upwards, and the other in a garment that left her naked from the waist down. I was prepared for astonishment at sight of me; but as though it were the commonest thing imaginable to find white men on lonely and otherwise uninhabited islands, they calmly went about making fast the canoe to a stake driven upright in the sand, and then they came up to me, the man in front, and in turn held out their hands in greeting, one of the women in a mistaken effort at cleanliness first rubbing her palm on her naked thigh.

The hut was his property, the man informed me in an English in which the words "feller" and "belong" were considerably overworked, and he had come from the camp of his tribe, a day and a half's journey down the coast. He had come here to fish, he went on. There was very good fishing here. Very good indeed, he repeated, and with a nod and quick movement of his arm indicated where the gold of the harbour was creased by series of flowing ripples. After which he ordered the women

Full
meeting with
Australians
12th evg

Have to be
from tribe
2 days &
half week

Then
Pishy

to go out after the fish; and when they had obediently launched the canoe and gone he said that the younger was his wife and the elder his daughter, which reversal of the usual order was due to the fact that he had had another wife but she had abandoned him recently for a Japanese pearl-fisher, whereupon he had neither grieved nor worried but promptly annexed another woman of the tribe and considered himself none the loser by the affair, as the second wife was younger and more handsome than the one he had lost.

Then he asked what were the circumstances pertaining to my presence on the island; and when I had told him, emphasising my poverty, he looked disappointed and said he had hoped to beg from me, and immediately afterwards betrayed deep concern for my well-being. On the return of the women he bade them cook for me some of the fish, which they did by burying them in the hot ashes of a fire, viscera and scales and all; and he told me that in the morning, when the tide would be favourable for making the passage, he would take me in his canoe to the mainland and personally escort me across the Peninsula to a harbour where there would be opportunity of hailing a passing boat.

I liked that stone-age man. He seemed so considerate and kind, such a real good fellow. I felt I could have trusted him anywhere. Yet, as I authoritatively learned later, he was one of the worst characters in a land where bad characters abounded. The water-police had wanted him for long. Charged against him was a list of offences ranging from murder to petty theft, and it was only his exercise of an astonishing bush-craft that saved him from capture. Also he was outcast from his tribe for being a persistent stealer of other men's wives and for making disturbances generally. Still, he was willing, quite without hope of reward, and merely in order to relieve my

Cooking fish

*Many Oils
of a
Stone-age
Man*

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distress, to make a long and dangerous journey. I consider him the most kindly intentioned murderer I have ever met.

But I had no need to make the journey across the Peninsula, for early next morning the trepang-vessel's white wing showed round the corner of the island; and presently she was through the shallows of the channel and anchored close in-shore, and the thin-faced captain was standing with me on the beach and apologising profusely for the delay, which, he explained, was due to the crew-boys recovering their store of confiscated liquor and drinking to such an extent that they ran the vessel on a reef from which she could not be freed for twelve full days.

A little later I had bidden farewell to my friend of the young wife and not-so-young daughter, made them a present from the trepang-vessel's stores, and was heading back towards the pass through which the *Endeavour* had sailed and where the *Quetta* made a dull uncertain shadow on the bottom.

clines up the
east of the
Peninsula
Tries the
west

For by this time I knew there was on the Peninsula's eastern shore no place suited to my purpose, and I was setting out to inspect more closely the western shore—the shore which formed one of the boundaries of the Gulf of Carpentaria, one of the most extensive waterways in the world. Wherefore on rounding Cape York once more the vessel headed on past the telegraph station, and on past rounded rocky points that projected seaward with aimless menace, past islands edged by broad and sloping beaches, past coral reefs whose branching arms showed brown to the falling of the tide, past river-mouths which sent a yellow swirling to the blueness of the sea, with all the while among the Peninsula's runts of hills and inconsequential valleys, and sometimes on its beach, the smoke of natives' fires.

Sometimes opposite one of these beach-fires we anchored

and I went ashore—to see what manner of folk these natives were, and to ask them if they knew of a place such as I sought. But always when I reached the huts they were deserted, and there was only the smouldering of the fire to show they had been lately occupied; and I was uneasily conscious that from the adjoining jungle numerous eyes watched my every movement, and I was glad I had brought with me a rifle.

“They think we water-police boat,” one of the crew-boys who rowed the dinghy for me said once. “They wild fellers. They always doin’ some bad thing, and the police-boat chase them plenty times. Wild fellers too much! They not like you and me!” And he went on to illustrate the wildness of those wild fellers with tales of tribal raidings, of stealthy death and sudden death, and of dreadful nocturnes, turning now and then to his companions for corroboration or elaboration, and at the end remarking that he wouldn’t care to live there among them as I intended to do. But as he told all this in the tone of one whose own civilised state was so advanced that he could regard such backward people only as subjects for contemptuous scorn, I didn’t take him very seriously. He was one of a class of coloured men who took every opportunity to convey the impression that they were most civilised indeed. I had met men like that who were less than ten years removed from cannibalism.

The Peninsula’s western shore seemed as unsuited to my purpose as the eastern shore. I landed on many beaches, examined many hundreds of acres; I entered river-mouths and narrow winding creeks; and always it was the same old story of arable land and shelter for shipping being never in conjunction. It began to be borne in on me that it was not to be my lot to bring this great land into its own.

*natives
retire,
being
"Wild-fellers"
fearful the
"Water-police"*

Settling at
Simpson's Bay

And then one morning we sailed into a harbour created by the vicinity of two large islands and several small ones, so placed as to give shelter from every direction—and all along the shore was a jungle, a thick, tall jungle, purple in the early light, and subtly tinging the breeze with the scent of flowers. I looked at it delightedly. Jungle-land was agriculturally the best land. Ground which would grow a jungle so tall and thick as this would grow anything. I could not have wished for a better place. Nevertheless as I went ashore I was prepared for disillusionment. I had been disappointed so often before. This place seemed just a little too satisfactory to be true. I suspected a catch in it somewhere. But there was no catch. The jungle-land was even better than it looked from the sea; and the amount of it was more than enough for my purpose, and the soil had a richness such as nowhere I had seen in this land, and there was abundance of fresh water—along the beach were several springs of it, and traversing the jungle was a tiny gurgling creek. I examined the place thoroughly, taking two days over it, becoming familiar with all its details, taking rough measurements of the area of the arable land, and sounding the anchoring-depths of the harbour. There was no doubt whatever that I had come at last to the place I sought. The only thing wrong with it was its name—which, according to the more or less inadequate chart of the region, was Simpson's Bay. Simpson's Bay seemed so utterly commonplace and inappropriate. After that long search of mine it should have been called something with a note of triumph in it. Even Eureka would have been better than Simpson's Bay, though I don't like Eureka as a name. As the vessel raced back before the wind to Thursday Island, I determined to discover the native name of the place and let it be known henceforth by that.

At Thursday Island I made the necessary negotiations with the Land authorities and became possessed of a large document importantly sealed and stamped and a plan inscribed to the effect that I was part-owner of the section shaded in red; then a supply of stores and tools were obtained; and in a few days I boarded an outward-bound vessel which in due course landed me at the ill-named Simpson's Bay and then went on her way. My task was begun.

*Getting Deed
& Equipment*

I was entirely alone. I had not even a dog. From the presence of numerous bark huts along the beach I knew the place as an habitual native camping-spot. But the ashes of the cooking-fires were cold and there were no fresh foot-tracks. I knew, however, the natives would some time return. Meanwhile I made myself as comfortable as I could, and between two of the great trees about the high-water mark slung a hammock, placed beneath it most of my stores and tools and personal belongings, and soon after dark, with rifle and revolver beside me, turned in and began a night in which the outstanding features were the wailing of curlews along the beach, the guttural barking of crocodiles in an adjacent creek, the howling of distant wild-dogs, and the imagined voices of stealthily approaching natives. I have been in many strange and dangerous situations; but I don't think I was ever so fearful for my personal safety as I was that night.

But with the coming of daylight my fears all vanished. I looked at my domain with the eye of a conqueror-to-be; and in so looking I saw the black and purple tangle of the jungle replaced by symmetrical lines of waving, fruiting palms, and myself on the veranda of a magnificent bungalow, saying proudly to myself: "I did it! I—who was once a wanderer of neither means nor purpose! I

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

am a creator! From a black man's jungle have I made a white man's garden!"

Indeed, so strong upon me was this envisioning that it was with the eager delight of a child that I selected a site for my residence. And it was exultingly that on a mighty blaze on a mighty tree I cut the initials and the date:

J. M.

7/10/'11.

CHAPTER II

THE NATIVES ARRIVE

I BEGAN the clearing of the site and the building of the house alone, for as the days went by no natives appeared, though far along the beaches smoke from their fires continually trickled up, and from among the inland hills a favouring night-wind brought always sounds as of drums. Often was I tempted to take rifle and revolver and go in search of them. But that would have meant leaving my outfit entirely unguarded—a risk I could not possibly take. So it was that I was compelled to await their spontaneous coming and meanwhile do what I could myself.

I don't think I ever have been so much thrown upon my own resources as I was in the days immediately following. In my vagabonding among the islands there were always natives to do things. There I merely managed and supervised. I performed no heavy manual labour. It was mine only to order the doing of a task and to see that it was done. For, I was a White Man among a multitude of black men, and therefore a Master and a Superior Person.

Here it was very different. Here I was master and labourer too. I not only made the plan, but I executed the plan. And in the executing of the plan I found my resources extremely poor. I found that my status as a Superior Person had been based on dependence on others.

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

My muscles, long out of training, so revolted at the unaccustomed work that a single hour of felling the heavy jungle trees left me aching all over and made my body crave rest as never it had craved anything before; and all the while I so gushed with perspiration that steaming puddles formed in every spot in which I stood; and the smooth handle of the axe lifted the skin from my soft palms; and so inefficient was I that I took twice as long over a task as any labourer would have taken, and made absurd mistakes and used cumbersome methods and no methods whatever. All of which surprised me very considerably and led me to taking stock of myself and my capabilities, to consequent humiliation and chastening of spirit, for I had so long been regarded as a Superior Person that I had come to believe I really was one, whereas it was now revealed to me that I was far less competent than even the humblest of coolies.

White ants
But despite these things the work went forward; and in due course I began on the framework of the house—a framework of exceedingly simple design, yet quite unlike that of an ordinary house, the unlikeness lying in the fact that instead of resting on the ground in the usual manner it had to stand on stout, hard piles a yard in height at least, with between the top of each pile and the supports of the floor a cap of thick flat iron. For white ants were everywhere, and their favourite diet was wood—dead wood for preference, but green if dead was not available, as was evinced by their occasional attacking of growing jungle-trees—and stout hard piles capped with iron was the only device I knew to protect the building against them.

I hated those ants, and saw nothing absurd in the fact that a full-grown man should hate a thing so insignificant as an ant. I feared that despite my protective device they would get at my building and destroy it;

and more than once the dreadful thought came to me that when my palms were grown maybe they would attack and devour them as at times they attacked and devoured living trees in the jungle. I derived but little comfort from the knowledge that palm-wood, being shreddy and teeth-entangling, was not at all to their liking, or from the recollection that in the whole of my considerable experience I had never heard of a plantation being destroyed by them.

For it was as though they resented my coming to this place of theirs and were determined to drive me away. If I left a box on the ground for even an hour or two they would be at it, riddling it through. They did their best to ruin various timbers I had cut and dressed ready for erection. They attacked the handles of my tools whenever they found them within reach; and as though destruction of the handles was not enough deposited a corroding acid which ate deeply into the metal. They made onslaughts on the stout supporting piles and despite their hardness injured them—a circumstance which caused me to protect them further by charring their outsides thickly. They even ravaged my clothes where I hung them overnight, and, as though to bring me tumbling down, gnawed at the trees to which my hammock was slung, and also devoured the sacks containing my food supplies, so that tea and rice and flour became irretrievably mixed. Indeed, so persistent was their onslaught that at times I came nigh to believing that were I to stand for long in one place they would surely attack my person. And all this despite that they were tiny squashy things, slow-moving and sightless; despite also that because of a peculiar aversion from light they travelled only in tubes built along the surface of the ground.

These tubes were about the thickness of a man's finger and were divided into two compartments, one for going

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

and one for coming; and some of them had such directness of line that they surmounted obstacles rather than went around them; and some had a length of a full five hundred yards or more; and such was the persistence of their builders that when I retributively destroyed portion of one there was neither abandonment of purpose nor even change of direction, but merely a halt in the processional comings and goings while repairs were effected with neatness and despatch. In the matter of definiteness of purpose these ants had nothing whatever in common with those species of ants which appear to spend most of their time running aimlessly and stupidly around; while in the matter of engineering skill they were the craftsmen of the insect world.

So, fighting against ants and bodily unfitness, the while feeling most tremendously alone, I worked at the building of my home. Then one mid-afternoon I straightened myself from a task—to look straight into the eyes of a man.

He was tall and muscular, smoky black of skin and entirely naked, and he had a lithe erectness of carriage which sometimes I think belongs only to primitive man. My first ordered thought was to spring for my rifle, which lay some yards away. But somehow I could not take my gaze from his face. For his eyes were curiously expressionless, the eyes of a man who looked but cared not whether he looked at all, the eyes of a man absolutely sure of himself and not at all afraid of what I might attempt—an expressionlessness so menacing that it came to me that though his hands were empty he might be dragging between his toes a spear which, by a quick raising of his foot, he could place in his hand, a trick, I had heard, that these people were wont to play. For a full half-minute we stood there, the white and the black; then the native grunted and uttered a word of

English he had somewhere picked up, a word which, I learned later, he thought was a greeting: "To-morrow!" and at sound of it the spell of his eyes was broken and I looked at his feet and saw that a spear was truly there.

I produced a piece of "trade" tobacco, and at the same time got my rifle. He took the tobacco, smelt it, broke it in two pieces and placed one behind each ear. Then he made an almost imperceptible sign, and another native, nude and smoky black as the first, stepped from out of the jungle so silently that there was not even the crackling of leaves beneath his feet. I gave him a piece of tobacco also, and he returned to the jungle and a moment later reappeared with a number of spears and throwing clubs, which he laid in a heap on the ground before me; whereupon the first man came right up to me and held out his hand in the European manner of greeting, save only that it was the left hand instead of the right, and in an English the most fearfully mutilated and full of antiphrasis I had ever heard said that he was my friend and that his companion was my friend, and then with engaging frankness asked had I any more tobacco.

When I told them that I had, they produced some tree-bark thin as paper and made cigarettes and lit them with a coal from my cooking-fire and squatting on their haunches smoked them. And as they smoked they told me that this was their main camping-ground, that the name of the spot was Utingu, which meant the Place of Many Big Trees, and that they had been down-coast on a fishing expedition, this being the time of the year when certain fish were numerous in a certain river-mouth. Then they asked the reason of my building a house here, and whether it was to be a trepang-station or a place wherein to store pearl-shell, but asking it as though they were only slightly curious about these things, but were more

Utingu

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

interested in the fact that I possessed a considerable quantity of tobacco.

In an English carefully chosen so as to be as bad as theirs, I told them of my object, adding that I needed labourers for the work and was depending on the natives to supply that need. They shook their heads; they were hunters, they said in effect, not workers—a statement which caused me to deliver a homily on the advantages of working, and having a regular supply of food, over the uncertainties of the chase, and which they considered to the extent of agreeing with me and declaring that while they themselves were disinclined for work, no doubt there were some in the tribe who would like it. There were a lot of people in the tribe, said one. More than he had fingers and toes. More than his friend had fingers and toes. Some of them would surely want to work, said the other, adding that the whole of the tribe would be along soon. Meanwhile, they would like some more tobacco. . . .

*The tribe
came
single file
& Dogs
who they
were—*

A little before sundown the first of the tribe appeared along the beach, then the others, mostly one behind the other, each with a head-burden of personal effects and the men their weapons besides, accompanying them an extraordinary number of dejected and part-starved dogs. They seemed at first glance exceedingly ill-kempt and uncared-for. The women, thin-legged and narrow-chested, wore dresses contrived from scraps of cloth that had come their way, and while some of the men were nude, others were dressed to the extent of a pair of trousers and still others to the extent of a shirt—cast-off oddments of pearl- and trepang-fishers and others who travelled the coast. On the dress of one woman was stencilled: "Lily White"—indication that her garment had been once a flour-bag; and the coat of one man had on it a

brass button whose inscription showed that its original wearer had been a member of the Japanese Navy.

And, besides their unkemptness, the expressions of their faces seemed remarkably ferocious. Indeed, they were the savagest-looking savages I had seen. Later I became so accustomed to this appearance of ferocity as to take no heed of it at all; but this first sight of it disturbed me considerably; and that night and for several following nights I lay much awake watching the flickering of their camp-fires and listening to the murmur of their voices and the half-hearted quarrelling of their dogs, the while disconcertingly recalling the stories I had heard of the barbarity of these selfsame people.

I rose earlier than usual next morning. I expected a day of great busyness, a day of engaging labourers, informing them of the wages and rations they would receive, appointing and explaining tasks, and so forth. But the hours went by without a native appearing. In the camp along the beach there was no hint of life. There was nothing to indicate that I was no longer alone in this place of mine. I wondered at this quiet. It was so unlike the behaviour of natives to whom I was accustomed; had this been a beach in, say, New Guinea, I would have been surrounded long since by a chattering, excited crowd pouring out questions with an impatience which allowed no pausing for replies. I feared there was something wrong; and about ten o'clock I went to the camp to discover what it was.

There was nothing wrong. It was merely that the tribe had not yet risen; they were asleep, the whole of them—asleep with such thoroughness that the sprawling of them about the feet of the trees and under various crude bark shelters they had built was as the sprawling of a community of mostly-naked dead. But the dogs were awake; and at my coming they set up such a snarling

*They sleep
till 10*

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

and barking that presently a girl stirred and sat up, and a youth near her opened his eyes and stared at me dully, and an elderly man muttered what was patently a petulant rebuking of the dogs, and others moved uneasily and gradually and reluctantly awoke, and a child or two wailed loudly; and soon the whole tribe was more or less stretching wide their arms and yawning extravagantly, their manner the while indicating that they thought it most inconsiderate of me that I should disturb them so early.

Parley

I approached a man who appeared to me a chief or leader of some kind, he being easily the tallest and broadest of them all, besides much the savagest of expression, and by gestures and by words I hoped he would understand, but feared greatly that he wouldn't, explained my purpose and intentions, saying that I would make of this place of jungles a beautiful and extensive garden so filled with foods that there would be abundance for everyone, and that I needed men to help with the work and would give them all manner of things from my stores in payment—tobacco and cloth and sheath-knives and tomahawks and many other things, all of which I had in plenty, as anyone could see for himself if he liked to come to my tent.

Offered pay for labor

He made no answer, neither did the one or two others who had casually approached, and, thinking maybe I had not been understood, I repeated the whole medley of words and gestures, changing their order here and there and adding a few new ones, thinking all the time that the employing of these people was not to be the easy matter I had thought in Thursday Island, and fearing acutely for the success of the venture; without the assistance of these savages the making of the plantation was impossible.

But the interview turned out quite satisfactorily, for

presently, when I had given him a piece of tobacco—which in the most casual fashion he placed behind his ear—my listener gave me to understand that the thing did not rest with him, but with the individual members of the tribe: that they could please themselves in the matter; whereupon the others, who had stood listening in silence, informed me that they would be willing to accept the things I spoke of in return for a little work; and with that they wandered away and returned with a number of others, who addressed me in similar terms, though quite without eagerness or delight, but almost as though they were merely obliging me, as though they didn't like to see me stranded, so to speak. This appearance of indifference, however, was but expression of the philosophy of the nomad. As befitted members of the most casual race of people in the world, casualness was one of their outstanding characteristics.

I was soon to discover that they were perfectly willing to work, anxious even, for when I selected a dozen or so of the strongest and seemingly most intelligent and took them to my tent for a ration of flour preparatory to beginning their labourings, they were followed by a long procession of old men and young men, grandmothers and girls, children of all sizes, each of whom held out to me a broad piece of bark, or an old jam-tin or other receptacle they had found washed up on the beach, and asked for flour, and intimated that he, or she, was going to work for me too. I wanted people to work—well, here they were, the whole tribe, said one. They would all like some of the tomahawks and knives I had spoken about, said another; and a woman put out a finger and touched one of my bales of red cloth to discover whether the colour would come off, and smiled when she found it wouldn't.

They took it for granted I would employ them, and

Many
accept
these
character
little
casual
was

How Austr
Name Nuhua

regarded me suspiciously when I gave flour only to the men I had engaged. One man made remarks and gestures to the effect that he couldn't understand why this was so. Why had I given flour to the others and not to him? he asked. Had I not said I would give flour to those who worked for me? He pushed a jam-tin insistently at me and towards the opened bag of flour. Another—the large and savage-looking gentleman whom I had first addressed on the subject of obtaining labourers—pointed out in a mildly complainingly fashion that a man could not work without food, as he spoke shaking his head with the satisfied air of one uttering a new truth of great wisdom and profundity.

I explained as best I could that I had not meant to employ them all—that I *couldn't* employ them all, pointing to the flour-bags in illustration of the fact that I had not sufficient to feed a number such as this for more than a few days. I said also I hadn't work for so many, and added that perhaps later I would be able to engage them. I don't think these arguments impressed them at all. They had no idea whatever of how many rations there were in a bag of flour, while as for my statement that I hadn't work for so many they clearly thought that the more people there were to do it the easier would be the work. But they made no really serious complaint; and when I gave them each a piece of tobacco and to one or two a ration of flour, they lapsed into their old casualness and straggled back to the camp perfectly content.

And now I encountered my first real difficulty, a difficulty indeed which in all the years I was there I never wholly succeeded in overcoming. It was that of teaching the natives the use of European tools. As people accustomed to the implements of the stone age in which they lived, implements such as a saw, chisel, hammer,



SOME OF THE NEWLY-CLEARED JUNGLE.

and auger were completely beyond them. Though they were quick to grasp the purposes of these tools, they were exceedingly slow to learn to use them effectively and without damage. Even the most intelligent was liable to buckle a saw within two minutes, the repairing of which would cost me, maybe, a full two hours' work. In fact half my time was occupied in repairing damage caused by my well-intentioned palæolithic carpenters.

And after the house was completed and the felling of the jungle in the making of the plantation was begun it was the same. Axe-handles were broken with exasperating frequency and the edges chipped. Sometimes half the labourers would be idle while I put in new handles—a task I had always to undertake myself, for to delegate it to one of the natives meant damage to the repairing tools. It was a heart-breaking business, and as a means of remedying it I tried the infliction of penalties—reducing a man's tobacco ration, making him work longer hours, and so forth—but all to no purpose, and I had at last to remove the penalties, for the natives began to murmur at being punished for accidents, and it was highly desirable that I avoided letting them think I was a harsh and unjust man, for primitive though they were they were profoundly aware that blame should be attached to intention rather than to effect.

Another difficulty was inducing them to rise early in the morning. Each night it was the custom of the whole tribe to sit round the camp-fires, chatting desultorily and every now and then droning fragments of dance-tunes, till midnight or later, with the result that in the morning they were exceedingly loth to rise. Further, they were accustomed to huge quantities of sleep. In their wild roaming of the bush they slept whenever inclined. A man successful in the chase, more or less cooked his capture, ate it and then went to sleep. If when he awoke he was

Breakers of
Tools

Their
Evening
Their Sleep

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

hungry, he went out on the chase once more; if not he turned over and went to sleep again.

Also, they slept with such soundness that to awaken a man was quite an achievement. The native way of doing it was to squat beside the sleeper and in a low monotone infinitely repeat his name. Once when I remarked that this seemed a slow process and made to shake the sleeper awake, I was told in an alarmed tone that that would not do at all.

The Spirit
absent in
Sleep

The awaking of a sleeper, it was explained, was a serious matter. When a man slept, his spirit left his body and went roaming; a spirit after being enclosed in a body for several hours, I was told, became restless and liable to do its owner a mischief; and the awaking was done slowly in order to give the spirit time to return, a body without a spirit being a most dreadful phenomenon.

Instances were related to me of sleepers being awakened before their spirits returned; and while most were of the mythical, out-of-place and out-of-time order and devoid of significant details, there was one with details in plenty, and which besides was a tale of Love and Tragedy.

The Story
the Absent
Spirit

It was told me by one of the Old Men of the tribe as he sat on the veranda of the house one evening, with before us the darkling spread of the sea and on either hand the tall black wall which was the face of the jungle. The Old Man was very old, with a body so thin that the bones of his shoulders showed pale through the dull blackness of his skin; and he told the story with a sincerity and impressiveness I have seldom seen excelled, despite that his exceedingly limited knowledge of English caused him to halt frequently in search of a word, which more often than not he would so utterly fail to find that he would resort to gestures and fragments of native speech, some of which I by this time knew.

The chief actor in the affair, it appeared, was the Old

Man's brother, at the time a tall and strapping youth much skilled with the spear and a warrior of such renown that in all the camps along all the beaches songs were made of him and his prowess. The Old Man remembered some of these songs, though it was all so long ago; and in a quavering, guttural voice he sang a little of one, the while swaying his thin body to the simple rhythm of the tune. It was a great song, that one, he said at the end, and had it been made about himself he would have been a proud man indeed. But he had not been a great spearman and warrior like his brother. . . .

Then his brother took to wife a girl of a neighbouring tribe—a handsome girl, straight of body and long of leg, with breasts firm and round—a girl who had never had a man before, though many had sought her; among them another warrior, a youth, who on the day of the marriage fought her lover for her, only to be badly beaten. As this happened in the presence of the whole tribe, the warrior-youth's humiliation was great, and he resolved to be avenged; and that night, spear in hand, he crept to where lay the newly married pair. The bridegroom was asleep, but not so the girl; and she saw the other's black form loom up clear against the sky, saw him stop a pace from the sleeping man and raise his arm, the spear quivering like a living thing. For a moment she lay there nerveless with fright; then with a great cry she sprang up and over her husband and diverted the point of the descending spear.

And with that, said the Old Man tremulously, his brother awakened and others of the tribe came running; and then commenced a great wailing and beating of hands on foreheads, for though the bridegroom was awake his eyes had no brightness in them, and his tongue hung out as though it had no strength, and when he spoke there was no meaning in his words. And from then on

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

his wife went with him always, tending his every want; and because of the great grief that was hers the straightness of her body soon left her and her breasts lost their firmness and roundness and drooped like those of an old, old woman; and once at the full of the moon and once at the new she would cover her body with ashes and with clay and go to the place of her bridal night and moan of her foolishness in so suddenly awakening her man, though the touch of her foot on his body as she sprang and her great cry had been engendered only by desire to protect him. And in the pathetic hope that the roaming and homeless spirit might chance upon its owner, she took her husband to sleep in a different place each night.

But the spirit never returned, said the Old Man sadly, adding that no doubt it still wandered homeless through the jungle, moaning perhaps as that young bride had moaned. After which he for a time sat silent, staring at the tall black wall of the trees, with his thin head a little sidewise, as though listening. Then he rose stiffly and after begging a piece of tobacco went down the steps and towards the camp, the while singing gutturally to himself the song the tribes had made of his brother's remarkable prowess.

As time went on, the difficulties of my task increased. It was, for instance, no easy matter to persuade the natives to work on succeeding days. We worked yesterday and are tired and would rest, they would say, adding pointedly that in their habitual mode of life they worked not at all, and hunted only when need for food was on them. Whereupon I would point out that in their wild life they had no tobacco, or flour, or coloured cloth, or tinned meats or tinned fish, or any other of the luxuries they coveted, and that the only way to obtain them was by working all day and every day; and it would be only

Mixed
Working

THE NATIVES ARRIVE

after further and more elaborate argument of the kind that they would take up again the hated tools of labour.

Then, they took an exceedingly long time over their meals. Even when they rose early in the morning, they so dawdled over breakfast as to be late for work. They ate with remarkable slowness, consuming the food in small pieces, and masticating it most thoroughly—this application of the principles of Fletcherism being due, no doubt, to the need in their wanderings in parts where food was scarce to make the most of whatever edibles they found. The midday meal was an even lengthier affair, it being the principal meal of the day, and after it, it was their wont to immediately go to sleep—and sleep away the whole afternoon had I not gone to the camp and awakened them. A lunch-time visit to the camp was one of my daily duties—and a most irksome one, there being few things I disliked more than the lengthy and provoking business of awaking sleeping natives. It was such a dreadfully thankless task.

Again, their labours were often interrupted by the fact that it was their age-old habit never to pass by food. Should a man in the course of his cutting away the undergrowth come across the thin trailing vine of a wild yam, he would at once abandon his attack on the undergrowth in favour of digging the tuber, a matter which might occupy an hour or more. Should a tree when it was felled prove to have in it a wild bees' nest, the men who found it would do no more felling till the nest was cut out. Should they disturb a wallaby or other animal, all hands would immediately set off in pursuit, abandoning their axes for the spears they kept always by them, streaming off through the timber, calling directions one to another regarding flanking the quarry and heading it off, and returning not for an hour, or several hours maybe. To my remonstrances concerning

Fletcherism

Nest Fa

Getby the

Bees

Wallaby

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

these interruptions they paid but little heed, save to remark that the wasting of food was not their fashion, and that because they worked for me was no reason why they should no longer dig yams, dig out bees or hunt wallabies.

Spying on their wives
Further, those of the labourers who were married were in the habit of going off to the camp every now and then to see that all was well with their wives. These people had a most absolute distrust of their women. They believed no woman should be out of her husband's sight for long. There was always some other man who desired her, I was told, and as often as not the woman desired the man. It was quite an easy matter to lose a woman, and the only thing for a husband to do was to keep alert. There was one labourer who was missing several times a day for this reason; but why he should have worried I do not know, for his wife was by far the most unattractive woman in the camp and somewhat elderly besides; in fact, I suspected his anxiety was merely a ruse to gain respite from his labourings—till one afternoon I came across him spying the camp from behind a conveniently concealing tree. I don't know, however, whether he was afraid or merely hopeful.

pretended jealousy? afraid from the whites?

distressed by heat
Then, too, the heat distressed them—a circumstance which surprised me. Cape York being so close to the Equator, the heat was, of course, considerable; but I did not expect that the natives would suffer from it. The trouble was that in their ordinary way of life they stayed always in the shade when the sun was hottest, doing their hunting and travelling only in the cool of the morning and evening, while their duties at the plantation involved their being in the sun all day, and, further, working in it—and till now they had never performed work so hard as this. They gushed perspiration even more freely than I had gushed it what time I worked at the building of the house alone. They became quickly

exhausted and had frequently to seek rest and time for the gaining of breath. In ordinary circumstances sustained effort of any kind was much to their distaste; but sustained effort with an axe in the full blaze of midday was beyond their powers. After a week or two I lengthened the midday interval from one hour to three hours—an arrangement which shortened the working day accordingly, for it was quite useless to attempt getting them to rise earlier in the morning and therefore start work earlier, and the briefness of the tropical twilight made it impossible that labours should be continued after sunset.

There was also need for constant supervision while they worked, for if I left them at any time they would immediately sit down and smoke or go to sleep—if they didn't chase wallabies or go spying on their wives. They had an astounding facility for going to sleep at an instant's notice at any time or in any place. Often in those early days did I return from a brief absence to find the whole of the labourers stretched like black shadows on the ground. I tried upbraiding them. It was of no use. I tried ridiculing them—saying scornfully that they worked like women or children, that they had neither strength nor endurance. That was of no use either; they had none of that acute sense of shame I had noted among the Papuans and Solomon Islanders and others. There were, in fact, no means by which I could persuade them into sudden acceptance of a daily routine of toil; and at last I saw that my only chance lay in gradually accustoming them to it.

For a time the task appalled me. Never, I thought, would I succeed in teaching regular habits to these nomadic creatures of impulse. I was attempting the impossible. I was attempting to alter and fashion to my liking the characters and habits of a people whose characters and

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

habits were as different from mine as the many thousand years between our periods could possibly make it. The thing seemed ridiculous—so much so that, despairing, I concluded there was much wisdom in the warning of the wife of the trepang-vessel's captain and in the sandal-wood-cutter's adjectival declaration that I was a fool; at these times I considered abandoning the whole venture as it stood, that phrase of business advice, "Let the first loss be the last," repeating itself to me with an insistence which would not be denied.

This Locality But matters began to improve, and I took heart again and felt I could not go. The place was growing on me. It was a most beautiful spot. Straight in front, across two miles of smooth blue sea, was an island, a large island with a backbone of gentle-sloped hills which to each rising and setting of the sun were tipped with gold with fire in it, and a white beach which at this distance was as a thread of cotton tying the land to the sea. Beside it was another island, a smaller one, but higher, with a row of brown serrated peaks, and its nearest side a towering cliff which cast wide shadows on the blueness of the sea. And in between and all about were various other islands, some of them treeless dots of sand and coral, and sandbanks that showed only at lowest tides, and reefs that showed not at all save in a thin amorphous greening of the sea.

Then there was the beach, three miles or more of it, a broad and sloping beach most generously curved and for the whole of its length a pure french-grey, with at one end a rocky point, which gleamed whitely with shells, and at the other the mangrove-fringed mouth of a stream, which made across the greyness of the sand a thread of silver. And back from the beach in one place were hills that invited one to drink from cool streams about their feet and then ascend their easy slopes and

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THE BEACH, LOOKING FROM THE HOUSE. NATIVE DWELLINGS IN CENTRE.

rest on the softness of their grass; and in another place was a serpentine lagoon, five or more acres in extent, edged wholly by thickly foliated vines with scarlet berries bunched about the greenness of their leaves, and all of it covered by water-lilies like great blue plates, with upright in the centre of each a small white flower shaped perfectly in the manner of an egg-cup and as delicately translucent as finest china.

And added to all this there was the thought that while it would be a fine thing indeed if I succeeded in making of this black man's jungle a white man's garden, it would be a finer thing still if I succeeded in turning a whole people from wandering idleness to habits of industry. With my taking of heart, it seemed to me that it might possibly be done after all. It did not occur to me that the natives were happier as they were. It did not occur to me that the creating in them of needs and desires hitherto utterly foreign would also create in them the necessity for satisfying those needs and desires, to the consequent destruction of the more or less complacent ease of their existence.

Nor did it occur to me there was anything incongruous in the fact that I who had for so long been a wandering idler should set such a store on industriousness.

CHAPTER III

THE PEOPLE WHO STOOD STILL

I MADE myself as comfortable as possible. I was not at all minded to endure personal discomfort such as I had seen others endure in the wilds. Often in my wanderings I had told myself that should I ever settle down I should make my house a Home, not merely a shelter from the weather and a place wherein to sleep. So it was that, liking roominess, I made the house a full sixty feet each way—an extravagant size for a one-man dwelling—and built along the front and down one side a veranda of satisfying width. There was one large room, in which I ate in solitary state and listened to the troubles of the natives, and a smaller room, in which I slept. The floors were covered entirely with closely woven mats I had garnered in Papua and elsewhere—mats that were love-gifts, mats that were tokens of blood-brotherhood, and mats that had come to me by the unromantic ways of trade, with dexterously attached to each a fringe of beaten hibiscus bark dyed cunningly a dozen hues. Furniture I contrived from packing-cases and the like, and covered it with cloth from my stores. At the back was the kitchen, with in one corner a fireplace having a chimney of galvanised iron laboriously rounded, and on the walls shelves made from the flattened bark of trees; and a little above the beach, near an everlasting fresh-water spring, I made a bathroom and installed a home-made shower.

And all about the house I planted a fence of growing shrubs, some with such variegation of leaf that in the

The House

60 ft x 60 ft

Veranda 2 sides

Large Room

Little Room

Mats

Hibiscus fringe

Furniture

Kitchen

Chimney

Bathroom

Hedge



THE HOUSE AND ITS VERANDA SCREEN OF JUNGLE CANES.

brightness of the sun they made a twinkling of gold and green and bronze, some that gave forth continually strings of entwined blue flowers, and some that were crested by spiralled leaves pointing directly upwards—with through them and about shrubs of no outstanding beauty, but which were remarkable for the variety and subtlety of their scents. And the great wide veranda I enclosed with a screen of jungle-canes and hung it with growing orchids—blue orchids and red orchids, and orchids yellow like sunsets, and orchids whose leaves were lost in a smother of small pink-and-white blossoms that were as the faces of laughing baby imps. And as a further comfort and convenience I had a lugger-captain who occasionally came my way bring me from Thursday Island an acetylene gas outfit and piping, which I installed in each of the rooms and at three places on the veranda, so that when all the jets were lit the place was one white blaze of light.

Screen
Orchids

Acetylene

I had thought that at least this light would surprise the natives out of the nonchalance with which they accepted unusual things. But after a gasp of astonishment at the first quick flaring of the jets, they made neither remark nor comment, but regarded the light as idly as though this turning of night into day was the most ordinary circumstance of their lives. The fact was that they considered the thing inexplicable, and it was not their fashion to attempt solving the inexplicable. They merely accepted it as something beyond their understanding, and let it go at that.

Natives didn't
like the light

But they showed a decided interest for things they did understand. There was, for instance, the fact that I should build a house. They could see no necessity for building a house, and still less a house so elaborate as this; and they asked why I should not be content with a dwelling such as they themselves used—dwellings which

Question
house

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

were merely a sheet or two of tree-bark so laid on a crude frame of sticks as to be scarcely more than a sloping wall—dwellings which they built always back to wind or rain and which in response to change of direction in wind or rain they merely turned bodily around. There seemed to them no sense whatever in taking such trouble as I was taking.

They study the Hibiscus fringes
They were interested, too, in the hibiscus fringes of my Papuan mats, at first sight of them exclaiming in wonder and calling one to another to come and look, and often thereafter coming individually to the house in order to peer at them closely and feel their texture and smell them even, and to ask me the manner and habits of the plants from which they came—the reason for all this interest being that they knew the fringes for things of a tropical growth, but, there being no hibiscus in their own jungles, as a tropical growth new to them, a matter therefore deserving of the greatest attention.

*guinea
Knowing a part
of Environment
only*
For, they had a remarkably intimate knowledge and understanding of the bush and the ways and the life of the bush. Indeed, they were more conversant with their environment than any natives I had seen. In New Guinea a man might know a deal about fish and crabs and other creatures of the sea, and but little about the creatures of the land, because he was a member of that section of the tribe which did little else than fish. In the Solomons a man might have an immense knowledge of the animal- and bird-life of his island, and but a superficial knowledge of its vegetable life. These Cape York people all knew all there was to know of their surroundings—a circumstance due to the fact that being nomads who lived on what they could catch or find there was need to know where these things could be found, and be informed of their edible or non-edible qualities, for in the matter of food-hunting it was mainly a case of each man for him-

*Australians
knowing it all*

self. Though in some ways they lived communally, in this respect they were strongly individualistic.

But this wide knowledge of theirs was in nowise ragged or untidy. It was systematised and regulated. For each department of animate and inanimate nature they had a system of nomenclature as comprehensively complete as that which any trained scientist could have devised: and they knew the relationships of the various departments, and the significance of the relationships one to another. And all this information they carried in their heads, they having no means of writing whatever, and so indelibly was it impressed upon their memories that any one of them, even the children, could at any time deliver an impromptu and most enlightening dissertation regarding, say, a weed plucked haphazard, telling of its flowering and seeding times, its habitats and habits, of its preference for one kind of soil and aversion from another kind of soil, with the reasons for this preference and aversion, and so on through a multitude of details, all told with a simple matter-of-factness tinged with wonder that I should need to be told these things at all. I think they thought me a most ignorant person.

Indeed, one man asked me how it was I knew so little of these things; and I told him that what to him were the simplest facts of life were to us matters for investigation by learned men. Whereupon he looked at me for a time as though doubting that such a state of affairs could really be, and at length remarked that he had not thought that among whites it was the fashion for the many to be ignorant and only the few to be wise, and opined decisively that there must be something wrong with the constitution and government of my tribe.

Then he said it was not right I should go about without knowing of the things about me, and if I liked he would appoint himself my teacher, so that in due course I should

Then
Systematized
nature had

Then words
Memory

One offer
Teacher

become as knowledgeable as he and his fellows. I accepted the offer. It was, I thought, a fine opportunity of gaining a knowledge of matters of which I knew little or nothing. So, from then on I spent much of what spare time I had in the native's company, while he taught me from his amazing store of knowledge in a language made up of gutturally produced native words and words he thought were English, but were quite unlike any English I had heard, at the meaning of which medley I was sometimes driven to make flying guesses and sometimes understood, and as often was driven to abandon as quite beyond me. Even his name was such an unintelligible confusion of mostly consonant sounds that very soon I changed it to Jimmy, a change which he accepted with the casualness with which his race accepted most things.

But Jimmy soon tired of teaching me the ordinary and commonplace. Perhaps he found I was not so apt a pupil as he had hoped. Perhaps he privately concluded that it was hopeless to attempt teaching one of a race where all were ignorant save a few. He developed a flair for telling me of the extraordinary and bizarre. On the shore-reef he showed me a rifle-fish—so called because of its habit of shooting with a drop of water insects which flew close to the water. He showed me, among the roots of the mangrove trees edging the mouth of the creek at the beach's end, queer slimy fish which clung to the wood or climbed about it. From the beach he pointed across the sea and asked if I saw there, upright, an inch or two above the surface, a thing like the hand of a man; and when I had found it, he said it was the sail of a fish which used the wind to propel it, but that it was something in the way of being a fool of a fish, in that it had no way of steering, and so was quite unable to avoid an enemy.

He showed me the Dance of the Birds. The birds, of

Teacher of the
Rifle-fish

Climbing
fish

Velocipede?

a kind known colloquially as Native Companions, were long-legged creatures, tall almost as storks, and white and grey of feather; and the dance took place in the centre of a broad, dry swamp, from the edge of which, in a place of concealment, we watched. There were some hundreds of them, and their dance was in the manner of quadrille, but in the matter of rhythm and grace excelling any quadrille that ever was. In groups of a score or more they advanced and retreated, lifting high their long legs and standing on their toes, now and then bowing gracefully one to another, now and then one pair encircling with prancing daintiness a group whose heads moved upwards and downwards and sidewise in time to the stepping of the pair. At times they formed into one great prancing mass, with their long necks thrust upward; and the wide swaying of their backs was like unto the swaying of the sea. Then, suddenly, as in response to an imperative command, they would sway apart, some of them to rise in low, encircling flight, and some to stand as in little gossiping groups; and presently they would form in pairs and sets of pairs, and the prancing and the bowing, and advancing and retreating would begin all over again.

*Dance of the
Birds*

Then, from the unusual and spectacular Jimmy proceeded to the mystical and superstitious. He told engagingly of many quaint and wholly unbelievable myths, though believing in them himself thoroughly the while. There was the story of the Listening and Seeing Trees—trees half of whose leaves were the ears and half the eyes of a certain spirit charged with the duty of reporting to husbands the unfaithfulness of their wives. They grew dangerously convenient to the camps, said Jimmy, but the trouble was that no man knew them from their fellows—a condition of affairs which imposed upon philanderers need for extreme caution. The cunning with

*The Listening
Trees*

which the spirit concealed itself was disconcerting, Jimmy added a little complainingly.

*Wailing of the
God without a
Job"*

*Early promise-
cuity*

There was the story of the God Without a Job—a deity which wandered disconsolately about the jungles and the neighbourhood of the camp, moaning softly, like a woman wailing, the reason of his workless condition being that far back in the beginning of things, when man first learned to walk upright like a kangaroo, instead of on all fours like a dog, and gods were first appointed, upon him was laid the duty of punishing pre-marriage promiscuity, which was then a sin, but now was a sin no more. Jimmy said he almost felt sorry for this god whom the converting of a vice into a virtue had deprived of his occupation; and in case I should doubt the truth of the story, he gave me a wooden shield upon which was carved a likeness of the homeless spirit's face; and he said that should I doubt still further I had but to listen keenly on the first still, dark night, and maybe I would hear him wailing.

These natives had the lowest sexual standards of any I had met. In fact, save in the matter of adultery, they seemed to have no standards at all—and even adultery was regarded more as an encroachment on a man's possessive right than an infringement of any ethical code. Freely and without concealment the unmarried girls gave themselves to the young men of the tribe and to visitors from other tribes, sometimes in exchange for a coveted article of ornament or use, but oftener because such acts were to them as natural as eating or sleeping.

But though in promiscuity as promiscuity no evil was seen, it was distinctly a sin for an unmarried woman to bear a child, so much so that often the woman would be speared to death and the child's brains dashed out with a club, the reason for this dreadful treatment being that with all this traffic among the non-married there was no



THE CARVING OF THE GOD WITHOUT A JOB.

telling who the father of a child might be, and that were the child allowed to grow up in-breeding might result. In-breeding, and consequent lowering of physical standards, was to them a cardinal sin, for their very existence, individually and racially, depended on bodily fitness. But because of their knowledge of the abortive qualities of herbs and the like, illegitimate children were extremely rare. In all my eight years at Cape York they happened only twice, and in each case the girls were saved from being speared to death by the fact that their babes were born dead and undeveloped.

These people were possessed of a remarkable physical endurance. Any one of them was able to exist without food for periods up to a week, and, camel-like, they could go without a drink for many days. They were tireless travellers; journeying through the jungles they would swing along hour after hour with an ease of gait which made light of obstructions and took no heed of even the steepest slope, walking from the hips and with their bodies stiffly erect, the while making for their objective with astonishing directness of line.

It was impossible for them to be lost in the bush, even in bush unfamiliar to them. A most unfailing sense of direction and locality was theirs. One of them, a man named Kaio, furnished an illustration of this. He was an old man, sixty or more maybe, which among these short-lived people was a very considerable age, but still well set up and with a breadth of shoulder which told of a strength that had once been his; and he told me the story himself, though neither boastingly nor with pseudo-casualness calculated to heighten the effect, but in the manner of one who tells of his natural performance of a natural act.

It happened shortly before my arrival at Cape York. Kaio had killed a man who, he said with great and im-

Inbreeding
Transgression
of Expenditure
or more of
of over-
bation
abortives

An illth
chief cause
known me
G. of compen-
taria, or le-
on westward
Endurance

their walk

Sense of Direction

pressive simplicity, the Spirit of a Listening and Seeing Tree declared was the paramour of his wife; and the killing of a man in such circumstances being in no way remarkable Kaio had merely soundly thrashed his wife, added one to the number of the notches on the haft of his spear, washed its point clean of blood, and put the matter from his mind. But, presently, a police-boat, cruising the coast, put in at the camp, and the captain hearing the story of the slaying arrested Kaio on a charge of murder and set off with him on the long sail down the Peninsula's coast, for a place of civilisation and courts and magistrates.

This proceeding puzzled Kaio extremely. He could not understand this law of the whites which said: "Thou shalt not kill." Why should he not kill the man who had stolen his wife? he asked the police-boat's captain again and again, the while begging for release. He had merely obeyed the law of his tribe, he said, adding that surely there was no evil in obeying the law. But the captain took no heed, and at last Kaio determined to release himself.

So, one dark night when the craft lay anchored off-shore some four hundred miles from his home, Kaio avoided the vigilance of his watchers, blackened the soles of his feet with charcoal, so that they would be as invisible to sharks as the rest of him, abandoned his prisoner's dress and, naked as on the day of his nativity, slipped overside and away.

He told me that when he reached the beach he was more exhausted than ever he had been in his life. The swim had been one of three full miles—a not very remarkable distance for one accustomed to the water as he was—but there was against him all the way a tide of such swinging strength that he would have never reached the shore at all had he not been well-versed in the tricks of

Kaio's 400
mile Return
due March
Kaio's being
ca

swimming against a tide—tricks such as lying half across its direction, somewhat in the manner of a ship sailing on a head-wind; and discovering and using favouring cross-currents that swirled about scraps of reef and other comparative shallows; and diving beneath a surface current and progressing in the dead water beneath.

But compared with his long tramp home, that swim was as a trifle. Those four hundred miles overflowed with difficulties for a naked and unarmed traveller. The only inhabitants were tribes as savage as Kaio's own, and in their attitude to strangers as hostile. Always was he in danger of being seen, for the tribes were to be met often in unsuspected places. Sometimes he averted discovery only by the narrowest margin; once he had scarcely time to crawl into a hollow log to escape a party of hunters swinging along, spears in hand; another time he blundered almost directly on top of a camp hidden behind a clump of jungle—so close was he indeed that the dogs smelled him and set up a loud barking, and some of the men lounging about the huts took their throwing clubs and came out a little way to search, the women of the tribe chattering excitedly the while; but—because of Kaio's great skill in concealing himself—they found nothing and went back and abused the dogs for raising a false alarm.

Then there were rivers with banks so high that the finding of a crossing-place added many weary miles to his journey; and near the coast were creeks whose beaches bore spoor of man-eating crocodiles, but which he had no means of crossing other than by taking the dreadful risk of swimming.

Then there was the task of obtaining food. Much of the vegetation of this land was foreign to him, and, fearing to poison himself, he left it mostly alone. So, on coming to a place of hard flints he spent a full day

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

*Made a
Spear*

fashioning a cutting-tool of stone; then he sought and found a long straight stick and spent another full day with his cutting-tool making it into a spear; and with this he hunted birds and the smaller of the marsupials he now and then came across, eating them raw, for he feared to make a fire.

And all the while he headed north. The North was Home. No matter what deviations he made in search of food or in the avoidance of danger, he came back to that north-line as though it had been a straight, broad highway, instead of mere direction through the trackless bush. Often he travelled at night, for darkness made no difference to the straightness of his course. It was not a matter of taking bearings. He knew direction as a horse is said to know it, or a homing pigeon, and all the twistings and turnings of his journeyings and all the unfamiliarities of the land could not confuse him.

And so at last, after seeing on the way the rising of two full moons and almost that of a third, he came Home, somewhat thin from privation, but strong and healthy and eager for the welcome of his friends and acclamation of his skill in traversing four hundred miles of hostile country without having once been seen.

But, said Kaio, his friends were not at all pleased to see him. They were, in fact, considerably disconcerted; when he strode triumphantly into the camp, his rough-made spear in his hand and the scars of jungle-thorns fresh and numerous on the nakedness of his skin, there was instead of a shout of welcome only the chorussed barking of the dogs and a wide astonished staring from the people. Then it was explained that they had not thought he would return; the captain of the police-boat, they said, had told them he would be hung with a rope till he died, as would happen to any others of the tribe

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who killed a man. Wherefore his wife had taken to herself another husband; and the tribe had made a sorrow-dance for Kaio and a joy-dance and feast-in honour of the marriage; and from the manner in which they told him these things it appeared they thought it most inconsiderate of him to return.

But, Kaio went on brightly, although he was at first greatly angered and was quick to take the woman away from her new husband and thrash her even more soundly than he had thrashed her before, it all turned out for the best. For his feat in returning safely home made him renowned for skill in bushcraft and as a possessor of all the manly qualities, and brought from the other women of the tribe such admiring glances and expressions that his wife never looked again at another man, but remained most faithful and dutiful for fear she should lose him. And the police-boat captain thereafter left him in peace, thinking, no doubt, that a man who could come safely through a journey like that fully deserved to escape.

Like their neighbours, the Torres Islanders, these people were great dancers—so much so that often the work of the plantation would be held up for days, for once they began their dancing there was no telling when they would cease; intoxicated by rhythm and tune, they went on and on till utterly exhausted. Also, anything made an excuse for an outbreak of dancing—a birth, a death, the capture of a kangaroo. And often there was no excuse at all. In the cool of the dusk the tribe would be about their camp, the women tending the cooking-fires and gossiping, the men lying on their sides on the sand, smoking or sleeping, the children splashing in the shallows of the beach—when suddenly, as though something had stung him, a man would begin singing in a high falsetto tone which had in it a curiously challenging note; and for a

An Enoch Circle
His Sorrow-dance
Her Joy-dance

He takes his
wife again

Dancing

Challenge
Dancing

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

space of maybe half a minute he would sing it; then he would rise slowly, dreamily, with in his eyes an empty stare, and alternately beat his hands against his sides and raise them wide apart above his head; and in a slow succession of rounded notes the falsetto would go down, down, down, half an octave at a time, to a living, throbbing drone. Then another would vent the curiously challenging note, then another and another, each making the play with his hands as he rose; and soon the women would abandon their cooking and join in, and the children come running from the beach; and presently the men would whiten their faces and their bodies with clay and adorn their heads with feathers of coloured birds, and the women hang about their breasts strings of orchid flowers and with white ashes make phallic markings on their groins; and then, to the accompaniment of the Old Men beating one piece of flat wood sharply against another, the dancing would begin—a mad glad dancing, highly sexual and sensual, full of rhythmic leaps and swayings, with all the while a roaring four-note song which brought echoes from the jungle and went out across the sea like sound of devils screaming.

And I, watching and listening, would think despondently of work not done and curse heartily the man who began the uproar and wish fervently I knew some way of stopping them.

For, it was highly inadvisable that I should attempt to personally interfere. At any ordinary time the risk was present that they would spear me, if only in order to possess themselves of coveted goods in my store-room. At any ordinary time the risk was present that they might take it into their heads that I was an interloper, and avenge with clubs my usurpation of their land and destruction of their food-producing jungles. These were ordinary, everyday risks which might at any time become

acute. But to attempt stopping their dancing was to take a risk I did not dare to take, for with their eyes rolling extravagantly, their faces working grotesquely, and about their mouths the wetness of foam, they were as madmen—indeed, perhaps they were truly madmen for the time—who in their frenzy might have thought nothing of driving a spear through my heart. Anything was possible from savages so worked up as they were when dancing. The ordinary, everyday risks of my life were quite enough without one like this.

There were other practices with which I was careful not to interfere, though often I was impelled to. One was their custom of keeping the bodies of their dead for months before burying them. At some period during the dance following a death, the body was bound tightly with jungle-canes so split and shredded as to be pliable almost as silk, and then wrapped in many thicknesses of paper-bark, and placed in a more or less secluded part of the camp, where it would remain till such time as it was reduced to somewhat a tenth of its original size. Then a blood-relative of the deceased took possession of the dreadful parcel and kept it in his hut, sleeping and eating beside it; and when the tribe went on its wanderings the parcel went with them, being carried on the head of a woman were it light enough, otherwise a man taking it upon his back, or two men reeving it on a pole and suspending it between them on their shoulders. Sometimes I found one of the bundles on the ground near the labourers as they worked—a bundle which someone would perhaps inform me contained the body of his father, but which he would remove from the way of a falling tree with the same casual roughness as he would remove, say, a heap of tools.

They were an extremely affectionate people, and I think

Keeping the
Dead

this keeping with them of their dead was due to reluctance to so sever association with their relatives as by burying them. There may have been, however, some tribal significance in the practice, some superstitious belief—such as a belief that a man who was dead was very much like a man asleep, in so far that his spirit was wandering, and that if they carried him about maybe the spirit would discover him and bring him to life again. In fact, I once gathered a hint that a belief like this had something to do with the practice.

But I never could gather any definite knowledge of the reason, for though I frequently inquired, I was answered only with frowns and pretended non-understanding and much fingering of weapons; and I became acutely aware that I was one man among a multitude and that discretion was a thing of greater value than curiosity.

Another of their customs was to remove the central incisor tooth of their female adolescent children, the removing being done by placing on the tooth the edge of a thin, flat stone and striking it repeatedly with another and heavier stone—an operation which necessitated the girl being held forcibly on her back on the ground, a man to each of her legs and arms and another to her head, and brought from her such agonising yells that the first time I heard it I thought someone was being slowly murdered, and, arming myself, hastened to try and prevent it.

The operation was over when I arrived, and the mother of the girl was laving her daughter's mouth with a mixture of seawater and clay and sand, and with her naked forearm wiping away the blood. A number of women were gathered about them, looking at the tooth, passing it from one to another, and apparently commenting on its shape and size. One tried to fit it to the place from where her own incisor tooth had been removed at the

time of her reaching womanhood. A man seated in the shade had the operating stones in his hands and was making phallic markings with them on the ground. Every now and then he would beat the stones together and utter a single singing note. No one took any heed of my presence—till I asked the meaning of the dentistry. Then there was a general moving away from me and looks of consternation, and the only one who would answer was my old friend Jimmy, who said that the tooth was removed in order that the girl could "drink water more better," but saying it as though he considered me a most inquisitive person regarding matters which did not concern me, and therefore deserving of a snub. I think, however, that the custom had something of a totemic significance.

From fondness for their dogs arose a most objectionable custom. They valued their dogs quite as much as they valued their children; wherefore a woman thought it quite in order to suckle at her breast a pup which had lost its mother, or one sickly and in need of special attention.

"This poor feller small-dog not much strong feller, and brothers belong him not let him drink longa his mother," was what a woman nourishing a pup in this way said when I asked her to explain the occurrence.

In my early days at Cape York this practice was exceedingly common. I frequently saw a woman with a pup at one breast and a child at the other—and often the pup was receiving more attention than the child. But in response to my earnest solicitations regarding the liability of disease to children so reared, the custom became less and less common, till at last it was abandoned altogether. They were always ready to listen to anything I might say regarding bodily fitness. The primitive con-

*Suckling
Their Dogs*

ditions of their lives demanded that everyone should be as fit as possible.

Dog habits

Long of snout and body and in gait and general appearance curiously wolf-like, the dogs were of an inbred species of wild-dog, or "dingo"—of which in this country there were considerable numbers—and were nasty slinking things which snapped rather than bit, snarled rather than barked, and were much given to sitting on their haunches and howling in single notes which were each sustained for periods of almost incredible length—and howl so upon any occasion and apparently for no reason. Often in the middle of the night I was awakened by the sudden howling of a dog, and kept awake indefinitely, for presently others would join in, each venting a note in a different key, and still others till at length the whole of them were at it; then would come the gruff and angered voices of men disturbed from sleep, and the shrill rebuking of women; and the quiet of the night was gone utterly in a confusion of discordant sounds which would become harsher, louder, and more intense till I felt I could bear it no longer. Then, at the end of half an hour perhaps, the howling of the dogs would slowly die and the shrill and angered voices cease, and the night resume its solemn brooding; and in the morning someone or other would explain that the dogs had come "sorry along themselves," and remark that it was only with great difficulty that he had refrained from thrashing them.

Seldom were the dogs thrashed or treated with other than the greatest indulgence. A man would himself go hungry rather than his dog should go hungry. At meal-times the animals took their haunched positions in the circle of the eating natives and shared morsel for morsel with them, and insistently demanded more—and received it—when they thought they were not getting enough. Should one of them become injured in any way, it was

treated with infinite care and tenderness; I knew a woman once to sit up all through a night macerating herbs into poultices and applying them to the broken leg of a dog so old, attenuated and scaly that it would have been better dead. In the matter of having kindness lavished upon them and being pampered generally, these slinking, snarling creatures were quite as well off as any fashionable lap-dog. These dogs were intensely disliked by a dog which was presented to me by the captain of the store-ship—a hefty and well-bred bull-terrier named Togo. Togo would have nothing whatever to do with the camp's dogs. He considered himself their infinite superior, and upon every occasion showed it, repulsing their friendly approaches and ignoring their attempts to quarrel with them, walking past them as though he hadn't seen them, with his head held high and in his gait a curious, disdainful stiffness—all of which led the natives to remark of him scornfully that because he belonged to a white man he thought himself a white man too. They resented Togo's slighting of their dogs much more than they would have resented any slighting of themselves.

Despite their non-morality and revolting practices, they were possessed of many admirable qualities. As their vices were abundant, so were their virtues abundant. Like certain cannibal friends of mine in New Guinea and elsewhere, they respected age and the wisdom that accompanied age, were seldom guilty of mean actions and of cowardly ones not at all. Lying was most infrequent, and stealing—other than the stealing of women—more infrequent still; with perfect safety I could leave my house unlocked and open and its contents entirely unguarded in my absence. They tended their sick or injured with infinite solicitude. I knew them to make great sacrifices for one another; on one occasion I saw a youth go to the rescue of a man who, swimming a creek, was

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

attacked and wounded by a shark, and with his bare hands fight back the shark till he had the injured man in safety.

And they did these things quite without any idea of displaying a virtue. They didn't know there were such things as virtues. They didn't know there were such things as vices. An act was just an act—neither virtuous nor vicious. To them there was no distinction between original sin and original good.

For, as members of perhaps the oldest living race of people in the world, they were ten thousand years behind the times. They had not reached the stage of ethical and moral distinctions. While the rest of the world strode forward to the age of steel, they had remained far back in the age of stone.

They were the People Who Stood Still.



MARY BROWN.

CHAPTER IV

MARY BROWN

BUT there was one who had made considerable progress in the civilised arts, even to having a civilised name—a woman called Mary Brown who, a half-year after my arrival, landed at the camp from a Thursday Island lugger and presently came to me declaring herself an efficient house-servant—a little woman, old, pleasing of expression though distinctly unhandsome of feature, bareheaded and barefooted in the manner of her kind, and dressed in a skirt of printed cotton and a blouse which came down not quite far enough, and so revealed at her waist, like a belt, a strip of her dull black skin.

Hitherto I had had no one to attend my personal needs—but not because of any scarcity of would-be servants, for perquisites so made the position a coveted one that almost every day someone or other would apply, usually a woman, but now and then a man, often a wild and woolly person with smears of clay from the last dance still about his naked body. But as house-servants they were even more unsatisfactory than they were as plantation labourers. The only cooking they knew was the cooking of the camp, which wasn't cooking at all, but merely throwing the raw food on an open fire and, if hunger pressed, taking it off when scarcely warmed, otherwise leaving it an indefinite time, till perhaps it was unrecognisably shrivelled and burned. In the matter of cleanliness they were just as casual; their bodies were washed only when the rains came drenching down—which however was frequently enough—or when fishing they waded deeply, or in journey-

A house
servant

Not a
house
servant

Washed
& cleaned

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

ing swam a stream; and their huts they neither swept nor tidied, but from time to time moved them bodily to cleaner patches of ground. Indeed, their usefulness as house-servants was, in round figures, nil; and after various trials and attempts at teaching them I was at last compelled to reject their applications and "do" for myself in every way, even to scraping the pots and washing the clothes, all of which caused me exceeding dissatisfaction, for the heat and burden of the plantation day were sufficient without a round of domestic offices.

Wherefore it was with considerable doubting that I engaged Mary Brown. But the doubting soon vanished. Mary was fully as efficient as she had claimed to be. For her experience as a servant had begun as a child, she having been stolen from the camp by a pearler needing house-help for his half-caste wife in his Thursday Island home.

Thursday In the best English I had heard any of these natives use, Mary said it was a long time ago. A very long time ago. Thursday Island was now a place of streets and shops and houses of wood and iron, and the people were quiet people who never made rows or killed one another, or anything—at least not often. But in those days there were no streets, and many of the houses were of grass-thatch, and the people were a wild and angry people, always drinking and fighting and shooting and doing like that. That would tell me how long ago it was.

Her master "But," she went on, "that pearler, he was not like them others. No! He was a quiet, good man, and kind like anything, and when I was growed-up a little bit he made me his wife, and I thinked inside myself that I would stay with him always.

"But his half-caste wife, she thinked 'nother way, and made trouble. Big trouble. She came jealous. Half-caste women, they come proper bad when they come

jealous; and one night when I slept she sticked me two times with a knife. You look this mark here on middle of my chest, and here on my leg. And she sticked the pearler too, 'cause he waked up and tried to stop her; and always after he got one mark on his arm. My word, Master, I close-up dead that night!

"After that I ran 'way and not go back to that good pearler any more, 'cause I fright' of that half-caste; and I go to work for one missionary missus who make me wear proper clothes and look out always I not play round with man, which is fashion of missionary missus. And she make me call myself Mary Brown, like I got white skin and long hair, and tell me I not heathen girl any more, and make me go to church like anything and pray Our Father in Heaven, and wash plates and scrub floors and make beds and skin potatoes, and do like that always, always—till by and by I get plenty tired and think inside myself of the camp and of my father and of my mother, and after six months I sneaked on board one cutter and came back here and talked inside I never go 'way any more."

She went back, nevertheless, for though she had promptly and completely shed her refinements and become as much one of her tribe as if she had never left it, there came a time when those refinements returned, when the crude foods and crude housing repelled her, and hunting appeared a most unreliable method of obtaining a meal, and the dirt seemed unnecessarily excessive and the plethora of dogs a nuisance, and she longed acutely for the civilisation she had deserted, and wages to spend, and new dresses of print with bright flowers on it, and many things besides. She went back—to various adventures and experiences, one of which was employment by a Chinese storekeeper, and because of his fiercely amorous approaches running away from him at the end of three

*she new
missionary*

she likes

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

days, and, another, serving as a waitress at a sly-grog hotel, a matter which brought her into conflict with the police and to a week's imprisonment—and after a time the wild and the freedom of the wild called to her again, and she returned to the camp and her people; but only in due course to become again dissatisfied and restless and to once more long acutely for the things she had not, so that there was nothing for it but for her to cross the strait again to jobs and adventures and experiences. And so, for more years than she knew, she had come and gone, alternating between desire for the old life of the camp and the new life of the town, the while being satisfied with neither.

So it was that she was eager for me to employ her and to employ her always, for by so doing she would obtain the things she craved and at the same time be amid her beloved wilds and with her people.

the mother "I think," she said once, with pathetic earnestness, "that God He tell you to come here and give me job, so that no more I go 'way and come back all the time. I tired of doin' like that. Tired. For, my body it come old. Yes—God He good friend to me, like I heard missionary man say plenty times, though I not believe him before."

*the cheer
ful voices* Mary Brown made a deal of difference to my life at Cape York. In fact, but for her I don't think I would have stayed there so long as I did. Not only did she relieve me of the domestic offices—Mary Brown was something a great deal more than a mere washer of dishes and a cooker of foods, though she performed these services with an excellence I had long since ceased to expect in a woman of her race—she was a Personality, and the note of her personality was Cheerfulness. Never once did this cheerfulness desert her, and in a way nothing else could have done, it per-



WILLIE.

vaded the house and deprived it of that dull and depressing sameness which is a feature of one-man dwellings such as mine. Many a time did it win me from the cross humours of a long and weary day. Many a time did it cause me to smile when I thought nothing in the world would have caused me to smile. And when, as frequently happened, I lay ill with New Guinea fever and cared not whether I lived, but feared rather that I would, she would stay beside me always, now and then rising from her cross-legged position on the floor to lay a thin hand on my face and exclaim in well-simulated surprise that the fire in my blood was cooling quickly; or maybe she would place on my forehead a poultice of herbs she herself had collected and lovingly macerated, the while with buoyant decisiveness declaring the herbs unfailing defeaters of fever; and then she would squat again and with elaborate unconcern strive to hide the anxiety in her eyes. There was a great, whole-hearted courage beneath the cheerfulness of black unhandsome Mary Brown.

Holding to the belief that it was not good for woman to live alone, Mary in the course of her career had had a husband or two, besides a varied assortment of lovers; but by reason of her many comings and goings each of these attachments had been of a more or less temporary nature. Now that she was definitely settled, however, she determined on what she called a "long-time" marriage, and one day brought to the house the man of her choice—a sinuously-limbed individual, some years her junior, with a trick of screwing up his mouth and one eye and holding his head sidewise—and asked would I mind marrying them in the white-man manner.

When I replied that I had no power to perform marriages, she was not at all distressed, but said she knew I had not the power, and had come to me only because

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

Native marriage
she had thought I might like to be asked, she being my personal servant and me a white man, and all that, and that it didn't matter a bit. They could marry in the native fashion. Indeed, she doubted whether she would have cared for the white-man manner, as she had seen it performed at the mission and found it a mournful business, the priest and everybody, even the bride, having straight and solemn faces, and the singing being like a wail, and some of the women crying as though it were a funeral.

Certainly there was nothing sad or solemn about the native manner of marrying. But that was chiefly because there was no ceremony, or anything approaching a ceremony, not even a public announcing of the pair as man and wife; for in the matter of taking a life-partner these natives were as casual as they were in all else, and all that was needed was that the man gave it out to his friends—in the manner of one making a statement of but passing interest—that he had made arrangements with the woman and that from then on the lady was his wife; and there the matter ended, save for a feast, accompanied by a dance, at a date to be determined by unusual abundance of food.

In Mary's case there was neither feast nor dance, then or at any other time, for Mary in her great affection for me was so keen on seeing the making of the plantation progress that she refused to allow it to be interrupted by a dance lasting perhaps for several days. Indeed, the only feature about the marriage at all was the coming to me of her husband a short while later to ask were it permissible for him to change his name. It was a good name, he said, hitherto quite suitable and serviceable. But now that he was married it was different, he explained. It was not right that a man with a native name should be married to a woman named Mary Brown

—a white-man name; when a wife had a white-man name, the husband should have a white-man name, too. I told him that in European marriages it was the fashion for the woman to change her name, not for the man to change his, but that if he wished to invert this procedure I had no objection whatever. Whereupon he thanked me extravagantly and went thoughtfully away, and at the end of two days returned and informed me that after much consideration he had determined that henceforth he would answer to the name of "Willie." It did not occur to him that such a "pretty-pretty" name as this was ridiculously incongruous with the grim significance of the name he had abandoned, which, translated, was—Alligator.

Mary gave a deal of thought and attention to ensuring that I was properly fed. She would have nothing of my habit of being satisfied with something out of a tin. She believed in variety of foods. "You all-time eat from tin three times one day," she said once; "that's 'leven times one week, about twenty times one year—my word! that make your belly come angry feller and you come sick. Belly not like have one-kind food all-time." She sent her husband into the jungle in search of wild turkeys—which in places were plentiful, and were comparatively easy of capture, being large birds which made mound-nests the size of a house and stayed chiefly about them, and were capable only of short low flight—and his captures she roasted perfectly, basting them even, and stuffing them. She sent him to the great mound-nests to hunt for eggs, and the most recent in the collections he brought she fried or boiled for me, or made into omelets, and the others gave to friends in the tribe—to the natives any egg was an edible egg, whether ancient or modern. Each morning she sent him along the beach with a spear in search of fish for my breakfast, and whenever the tribe obtained one of the sea-turtles, which at various places

chasing in
at morning

Mary about
cooked for

provided the
mound-turtles
roasted

eggs

fish

sea-turtles
roasted

came ashore to nest, she was always at hand to secure a piece of it for me. Mary Brown's turtle cutlets were the finest cutlets possible, and her turtle soup a soup to be regarded almost with reverence.

Then, too, she kept me provided with fresh vegetables and fruits, some of them wild, some of them grown on the plantation, but all of them so served that they were always a delight; and she had me obtain by the store-ship things such as jelly-powders and cornflour and castor sugar and various spices, and all manner of odds and ends and small luxuries, none of which it had ever occurred to me to have, and the names of which Mary so mispronounced that I did not recognise them till she gave illustrations of their uses or imitations of their appearance. Her causing of tremors to run through her thin body in order to show me what a jelly was like was a thing to be remembered.

The captain of one of the vessels which brought my stores was very much attracted by Mary Brown's abilities, and remarked to her that he would like to have her at his Thursday Island home to assist his wife. But Mary would have nothing of it. Indeed, she was highly indignant at the suggestion that she should leave me, saying that if she went I wouldn't look after myself, but eat only tin' foods and make my belly come angry, and get plenty big sickness, and have plenty hard work cleaning altogether pots all-time, and washing clothes, and sweeping floors, and doing like that every day.

"S'pose he got missus, then he all right," she said. "But he not got missus—only me."

There was no doubt whatever of the strength of her affection for me; nevertheless, I think her refusal of this offer was somewhat influenced by the fact that acceptance would involve separation from her tribe.

These natives were more affected by the presence of a

white man, even a solitary white man, than any I had known. In my wanderings in wild New Guinea I found that the daily lives of the Papuans were affected but little by the fact that a European lived in the village, while in the Solomons it made scarcely any difference at all, in both instances the stranger being regarded as a curiosity rather than as an example. But with these North Australian aborigines it was as though they realised they had been left far behind in the march of events and were desirous of catching-up, to which end they were at all times prepared to abandon, for anything they thought better, habits and beliefs which had come to them unchanged down the centuries.

The having of a European name came to be regarded as one means of catching-up, and the example set by Mary Brown's husband was quickly followed. But just any European name would not do. They desired names with as few consonants as possible, for in their own tongue consonants predominated; and they were reacting against their own tongue. They desired names filled with vowels —“soft-one words, like white-man talk,” was how Mary translated their need—and came to me for suggestions, which suggestions they considered and discussed at great length, with the result that the men became Olivers and Charlies and Andies and Eugenes even, and the women Adas and Edies and Ritas and Ivys; and so keen were they on memorising the unusual vowels, and accustoming themselves to them, that often a woman would sit alone for long periods infinitely repeating them, and a man unnecessarily hail a companion, the while expecting to be hailed in return.

They changed the manner of their huts, making them with walls on all four sides, instead of on one side only, for they realised that though the new style involved greater labour in building, there was no subsequent turning

of the edifice around in response to change of direction in the weather. For the first time in their lives they were using the present to make provision for the future. For the first time in their lives they were realising there was any such thing as the future.

They saw, too, that some foods were more advantageously cooked in pots rather than on the coals, for with their awaking sensibilities eating became something more than mere satisfying of hunger. Their sense of taste developed. A glimmering of æsthetics was theirs. Turtle boiled was immensely superior to turtle flung on a fire, and provided a delicious soup besides. Wild duck stewed developed a flavour entirely absent from duck ill-grilled with viscera intact, while jungle-fruit when boiled afforded a sweet syrup whose existence till then had not been suspected. In fact, so greatly did "cooking in water," as they termed it, appeal to them that they became prone to making tribal feasts solely in order to exploit the delectableness of some new-discovered dish; and no sooner did I empty a biscuit-tin or other container than it was spirited away for transformation into a saucepan of sorts.

But though they were quick to see advantages in these and other usages, they failed completely to see any advantages in agriculture. It was not that they were averse from the labour the growing of food involved; it was mainly that they could see no need for growing it. For, all through the jungle plant-food was to be had for the taking—red apples and white apples, which were apple-like only in shape and tasted like a blend of wonderful apricots and pears; fruits called "wangais," date-like, but subtler of flavour than dates from Smyrna ever were; yams whose long thin vines trailed the ground as though to attract a seeker's attention by tripping him; bananas whose ripened fruit made gold of the jungle's green; arrowroot that bulged the soil as though impatient of

the dilatoriness of diggers; and many other vegetables and fruits, all of them indigenous and needing neither planting nor care, yet no two fruiting at once, but bearing with a regularity of succession scarcely to be attained by even the most scientific of cultivators.

In view of this spontaneous abundance, I think the natives held privately that in taking such pains to make things grow where already things grew of their own accord I was maybe a little mad. As for myself, there were times when, viewing the slow progress of the work, it came to me with considerable force that perhaps in this private opinion there was a deal of truth, that, after all, simplicity of outlook was saner than complex philosophies, that inasmuch as his mode of thinking was perfectly direct, primeval man derived fuller satisfaction from life than civilised man. The trouble was that my civilised heredity had taken me too far along the road to allow me to turn back without getting lost.

But though the natives possessed remarkable directness of thought, they had but little directness of verbal expression, a circumstance for which the limitations of their language were responsible. It was a most inadequate language. Some concrete things could be expressed in concrete terms, but there were many which could be expressed only by similes, or by roundabout illustration, while for abstract things they had no expression at all—this because in their great backwardness they hadn't reached necessity for the abstract; in fact, they didn't know there was any such thing. Further, the opposite of a word, and sometimes even its corollary, was often a matter for great redundancy. Thus, though they had a word for "hot," a man's only means of intimating that he felt cold was by describing heat and the physical sensations caused by heat and then saying he did not feel like that at all.

*Their
language*

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

*Their
counting by
fingers*

Their system of counting was also most inadequate—even to the extent that they had no means of estimating their ages, or the tally of the days which made up the cycle of the seasons, or the number of the nights between one full moon and another, or how many people were in the tribe, or how many dogs, the reason for all this being that the only numbers they knew were the numbers of the fingers of the hand, a limitation which imposed upon them the necessity for designating an amount greater than five as “a lot” or a “great lot,” according to quantity, and one which often compelled me to the exercise of considerable mental ingenuity in order to discover what the devil they meant.

*Singing in 4
notes
& octaves*

Their singing also suffered from limitations, it having four notes only, and their octaves, and knowing nothing whatever of half-tones, but only a play on those four full notes, the effect of which was to give to the tunes such similarity that at first hearing all the tunes seemed the same tune.

My old piano

Nevertheless, they had appreciations of wider ranges of musical sounds. During the second year of my life at Cape York I had brought me from Thursday Island a piano, which I installed in the large room and in the evenings more or less played. It wasn't much of a piano, being one I obtained for two pounds, this low cost being due to the fact that it was old, outworn and, in addition to other defects, had several notes which produced no sound at all and several which produced sounds they had no business to produce. Also, I was an exceedingly bad player, and more accustomed to playing with one hand than with two.

But the natives thought delightful the noises I produced, and as I played a number of them would come from the camp, walk softly, reverently, along the veranda and crowd about the open doorway and listen intently.

A favourite piece of theirs was the "Tell Me Pretty Maiden Sextet" from *Floradora*, though what there was appealing about a piece picked out mostly with one finger on notes that were mute and notes which should have been, I don't know. They even attempted to sing it, but the need to get that gay music within the compass of their four notes only made of the attempt sounds worse even than my "playing" of it. But they were not discouraged; instead they would ask me to play it over and over again, and shyly yet eagerly come right in as I did so, and stand behind me in perfect silence to the end, and then, with much approving nodding, declare it "proper nice-one song," and remark one to another to the effect that I was a remarkably clever person, inasmuch as I could play on the black notes as well as on the white.

But whatever the limitations of their camp-tunes, there were no limitations to the subject-matter of their songs, for the range of them began with accounts of heroic deeds performed by legendary persons possessed of dorsal horns and superfluity of limbs, and of still more heroic deeds performed by persons who had really lived, and went on through a long list, recounting more or less recent marriages and deaths of importance, and some of no importance at all, and events of all kinds, more gay ones among them than grave ones, and ended with a song which was not so much a song as a vehement exulting in the repetitive declaration that they were glad, glad, glad, glad.

And as though these subjects were not enough, they made songs of happenings of the moment—and made them very successfully, they having a surprising aptitude for charging with interest even the most trifling incident. Some of this *verse d'occasion* concerned quite definite events—the leaping of a fish, the crying of a child, a shower of

Heroic Song

Exultations

Improvising

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

rain—and was possessed of a recurrent rhythm and now and then a rhyme; and some concerned nothing in particular at all, but merely rambled on through a series of unrelated events, amorphous of design and empty of meaning, yet all the while giving forth a strange and subtle beauty of its own.

Songs about the This aptitude for making songs about anything and everything led them sometimes to making songs about myself. As pieces of versification, these songs were wholly bad. They lacked "story" and continuity of idea, had neither details nor elaboration, and were confined to bald statement contained in a single sentence, which sentence was repeated and repeated till the variations and combinations of their four singing notes were exhausted. Yet, listening, I was often most profoundly moved, for that single sentence was always to the effect that I was an excellent fellow and that they loved me—

"This white man is good and kind, and our hearts are glad he is here,"

is a rough translation of the sentence. A suspicion that they sang it only because of a temporary scarcity of good song-subjects, and a belief that they would have sung it about any other white man who lived among them as I did, made no difference to my emotional reaction. To be affectionately acclaimed in song by primeval savages who carried their dead about with them and suckled pups as they suckled children was a distinction of no mean order.

Dramatics They had, too, a keen appreciation of the dramatic, and were given to occasional—though very occasional—performance of plays. These performances took place always at night, on a cleared space in the centre of the camp, with the ground for a stage, and the audience squatted in a circle about the actors and illumining their

doings by means of small fires of a wood which made a bright-red flaring.

Some of the plays were put forward purely as light entertainment, being broadly humorous and concerned with events such as the foolish efforts of a foolish man to escape a series of wholly incredible misfortunes. Others were sharply pointed, and had a social significance besides. There was one which exhibited the enormity of consanguinity as a social and personal crime—in its representation of the anguish of a woman at being forced to an unnatural intimacy; this play had points of contact with Shelley's *The Cenci*. Another denounced emphatically the seducing of married women, with the seductive acts mimicked so circumstantially as to omit not even the lowdest detail, and with the climax of the betrayed husband clubbing the seducer to death, preceded by vivid representation of a dreadful sterilising punishment the said betrayed husband declared he would be delighted to inflict if only he had his way.

Still other plays were ingenious blends of actuality and phantasy tinged with symbolism. One I saw concerned a happening of some months before on the plantation—the falling of a tree in so unexpected a direction that its feller was crushed by a limb and almost killed. They made quite a good play of that happening. They made of the tree a thing of human significance. They translated its creaks, as the axe bit home, into groans and cries of pain. They turned its tottering into the trembling of a thing affrighted. And the roar of its crashing fall became a roar of sudden anger; and its great side-slip, and the veer in the direction of its descent, deliberate attempt at revenge on the man who had slain it. The final scene showed the crushed man's wives cutting their foreheads with shells, and wailing loudly, and denouncing the axe as a monstrously evil thing, inasmuch as without it their

Humorous
Plays

"Morality" Plays

Personified
Tree

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

husband could never have attacked the tree and brought this disaster upon him. The first time I saw this play I thought it the work of propagandists who, disliking the heavy labour of tree-felling, sought to foment a strike. But I discovered that this was not so; while as for the moral of the play, no one took any heed of it at all.

*How the Felling-
Tree play was
composed* This play was constructed in the way all their plays were constructed. At the suggestion one night of some one or other as they sat about the camp-fires that the accident would make a play, a man rose and depicted the anger of the tree; then another took the part of the man with the axe; and others the part of the weeping wives—the whole being filled with irrelevancies, and pointless speeches, and back-to-front action, and general muddle. But with repeated performance, order evolved from this chaos, and words, gestures and grimaces attained their proper order and became fixed, and always afterwards was performed in exactly the same way.

Costumes The plays were produced without "properties," or any appurtenances whatever, and the costumes varied from nothing at all to feathers and flower-petals stuck about the body with tree-gum, and the "make-up" was coloured clay and white ashes, and ran to the making of great circles about the eyes and mouth, and sometimes to the whitening of individual ribs, so that in the red flaring of the fires the actor had the appearance of a skeleton strangely and dreadfully fleshed.

*No women
acting* The actors were always men, usually young men, though now and then there would appear among them an aged person whose bearing seemed to indicate that he considered the stage had degenerated since his day, and that it was his duty to show these young bloods what acting really was.

There was one elderly person who scarcely ever witnessed

a play without leaving his position in the circle of the audience, striding in among the actors and duplicating one of the parts, speeches, gestures, facial contortions and all. He was a little man, with thin, claw-like hands and a nose immensely broad, and the manner of his entry was that of one who could endure the badness of the acting no longer. But his interference caused no interruption to the progress of the play, for no one seemed to see anything ridiculous in the fact that there were now two heroes, or two villains, as the case may be. Instead, it was as though they considered that this doubling of the part doubled the heroism—or villainy—of the character. I consider that little old person with the broad nose a dramatic critic with methods of commendable directness. He seemed to be fully grasped of the truth that there was no more effective criticism than criticism by example.

The plays, however, appeared to be performed more for the satisfaction of the actors than for the satisfaction of the audience. As a rule, the audience paid but little heed to the performance, some sitting with their backs to the actors, some lying face-down on the sand, asleep and snoring, some assiduously searching their dogs for vermin, and the rest watching the doings of the actors mostly with the casual disinterest with which they might have watched the doings of children scampering about the beach. Indeed, they appeared to regard the whole show as utterly boring, and to suggest that they were present only out of politeness, and that they would have much rather preferred a dance, or, failing a dance, an evening's "yarning"—all of which was due, no doubt, to their having witnessed the plays so often before.

"Yarning" was one of their principal occupations. From dark to midnight it was their habit to sit about the camp in groups and talk and talk and talk, the men telling

The Critic
actor

The Audience

Their Men
"Yarning"

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

one another loudly of the trees they had felled and how they felled them, or of fish they had caught, or of birds they had seen, the women whispering whatever scandal there was to be whispered—most of which concerned adulteries committed or threatening—the while their fingers worked dexterously and automatically at the making of small grass bags in which they kept and carried their few personal possessions—bags remarkable for the evenness of their weaving and the regularity of their pattern, for their enduring properties, and for a pliability of such quality that they could be rolled and folded like a piece of cloth.

Sometimes one of the men would come to the house at the end of the day and spend an hour or two “yarning” with me, talking on anything and everything, on subjects mostly unrelated one to another, and every now and then asking for a small piece of tobacco. There was one—a young man—whose “yarning” took the form of asking a multitude of questions about myself and the life I lived before I came to Cape York. Some of these questions were of a most intimate nature, being chiefly questions relating to my amorous experiences, if any; and some were concerned with discovering whether unmarried white girls were as—er—accessible as unmarried black girls, and if not, why not, and some with discovering whether it were true, as he had heard, that among whites it was a case of one man one wife, no matter how many women he may desire or how many women desired him, and with discovering what happened when a man tired of his wife and wanted to be rid of her, and also with discovering whether my coming to live at Cape York was due to my having such a wife and running away as the only means of being rid of her.

That young man was as interested in the civilised life as I was interested in the palæolithic life. But, I'm afraid,

Women's
whispers

& Weaving
Grass-bags

Yarning to me

The young
Interviewer

the information I gave him of the position of woman in civilisation disappointed him, for, as I spoke, he would from time to time shake his head and remark to the effect that he wouldn't live in such a place for anything, the restrictions being too numerous and extreme. He was a great believer in Freedom, was that stone-age Lothario.

CHAPTER V

THE JUNGLE'S REVENGE

MEANWHILE the making of the plantation progressed, slowly perhaps, and with many interruptions and delays, but nevertheless with such sureness as to give definite promise of actuality to the envisioning which was mine when I cut my initials on the tree.

For, by the first year's ending half a hundred acres of flourishing young coconuts stood where only jungle stood before, and a similarly large area was cleared ready for planting when the seed-coconuts in a nursery I had made were sufficiently grown; and there were, besides, several extensive plots of sweet-potatoes and yams and tapioca plants and other vegetables, which I fed to the labourers and so augmented my supplies of flour—the labourers' principal diet. It was a promising plantation indeed, and looking at it I was often pervaded by a feeling of utmost satisfaction, and would tell myself that a planter's life was the life for me. The immobility of the life disturbed me not at all, but seemed, rather, to be what I had always craved. Indeed, at times I was given to reproaching myself for having wasted so many years in idle wanderings, and to denouncing the wanderlust as a demoralising agent of considerable tonnage. From an aimless roamer I had become a Settled and Respectable Person, a man of property, with a vote in the local council—had there been a local council; a Ratepayer—had there been anyone to pay rates to; and altogether a self-satisfied young man who hoped, trusted and believed that the aforementioned wanderlust was well and truly dead.

50 ac. of Coco-
in one year

50 ac. more
for seed-coco-

Sweet Potatoes
Yams
Tapioca



LINES OF VERY YOUNG PALMS. TALL JUNGLE IN BACKGROUND.

And Authority confirmed my standing as a man of property and position, for the Government Resident of Thursday Island appointed me to a post which I can describe only as Honorary Distributor of Tribal Blankets—that is to say, the Resident sent me a great bale of grey blankets marked importantly with a Government stamp, and a letter informing me that it was the custom of the Government to annually present a blanket to each accessible aboriginal native of the country, and that the nomadic habits and general wildness of the people of my neighbourhood had hitherto made the presenting of the gift a matter of great difficulty, and asking would I mind taking upon myself the task of distribution.

Govt Blankets
to each
native

I had the bale carried to the camp and there opened, and to the natives one by one I presented a blanket, the while pointing to the important-looking stamp and saying what fine fellers the Government were to give along them such good-one blankets with big-one marks on them, and didn't ask them for pay or nothin', but gave them all as presents because they proper good-one friend along the natives and think about them kind-one all the time.

As the
Natives talk

The tribe, however, were impressed neither by the gift nor by my remarks, but took the blankets just as a matter of course, and that night slept in them, and next day complained to me that the things made their skins too prickly, and after that slept in them no more, but used them instead of bark for roofing their huts.

Used for Roof

Supplies of food and general stores were brought me by occasional passing vessels—pearling luggers, trepang craft, and the like—and the seed coconuts and vegetable cuttings came from New Guinea in a chartered cutter manned by natives of that country. These cutter-men were the first of their race some of my natives had seen; and my natives were the first of their race some of the

cutter-men had seen; for though their respective lands were apart a two-days' sail or less, the two peoples were given but little to exchanging visits. Indeed, there were among my people some who were in the habit of referring to New Guinea as to a somewhat legendary place inhabited by monsters rather than by men, some of whom had tails and others feet like birds. When I told them that this was not so, they doubted me plainly; and when in proof of my statement I said I had lived and wandered there for a very considerable time, they showed their teeth in admiring smiles and declared me more courageous than they had thought—an ingenuous, but ambiguous, statement which caused me to wonder what their previous estimate of my courage had been.

Still, they were not at all astounded to discover that the New Guinea men were human like themselves; they were interested only in the facts that the skin of the strangers was brown, and that they had great fuzzed-out masses of hair, and boars'-tusks in their noses, and tattooing on their foreheads; and after a few brief conversations about the strangeness of these things, they put the subject from their minds.

And the New Guinea men were just as matter-of-fact, being neither supercilious nor self-satisfied towards my natives, as I had expected they would be, seeing that they lived in well-built houses, made food-gardens, kept chickens, and hunted with bows and arrows, while my folk lived in crude huts, grew nothing and kept nothing, and hunted with roughly fashioned spears. They just accepted them as they themselves had been accepted; and the interesting display of contrasting attitudes which I had expected would result from this confronting of one savage race with another savage race failed completely to eventuate.

With the beginning of the second year I found that while the making of a plantation was one thing, the keep-

ing of it made was another thing. For, all about the clearing a riot of vegetation sprang up and savagely attacked my young and struggling palms—half-aerial vines which drew their fronds together in twisting, strangling grips; thick-foliaged bushes which crowded in on them, jostling them aside; intertwined masses of broad-leaved plants which shut out from them light and air; rank weeds which ate at their roots; strange things with spiky tentacles which they put forth and wounded the palms, to the bringing out of drops of sap in the manner of drops of blood. Even the stumps of the slain trees came mysteriously to life and thrust up clusters of tall saplings, which in a night seemed taller by several feet; and all about appeared plants which existed nowhere save in the clearing—plants which the natives, with all their knowledge of the bush, had never seen before.

These strange plants interested the natives immensely; at every opportunity they would study them in detail—examining the shape of their leaves and the texture of them, gaining knowledge of the length of their feeding-roots and the roots which afforded the plants mechanical support, the while speculating on their edible qualities, and, whenever there were berries or fruit, making cautious and tentative experiment. And at night, squatted by the camp-fires, they would talk much about them, and maybe speak of their having found during a wandering to other parts plants which had points of resemblance to these, and the Old Men would give names to the strangers, names more or less suggestive of their general appearance or some outstanding characteristic, names by which they were to be known by the generations to come.

There was one species of these new plants which the labourers were much averse from cutting down—tall, thick shrubs, they were, with green and yellow variegation of leaf somewhat in the manner of a croton—so

Weeds

Some plants
new there,

studied,

2 named

The Bad-lu
Plant

much averse indeed that at times they would refuse to cut them at all, and it would be only with great difficulty that I at length persuaded them.

It was a bad-luck plant, that one, was the burden of what they said when I asked the reason of this aversion. The wife of the man who cut one down would, like as not, bear him always girl-children. One of the Old Men had told them so. No man wanted a family of girls. To have a family of girls would be bad luck indeed. Sons were all right—they grew into warriors and hunters and dancers. But girls—they couldn't do anything. Anyway, there were quite enough girls in the tribe already, more girls than men. If I didn't believe the story about the power of the strange plant, I could ask the Old Man for myself.

The Old Man told me all about it willingly enough. He was a very old Old Man, and incredibly thin besides, and so feeble that he scarcely walked at all, but sat crouched within his hut, now and then sucking at the ruins of a clay pipe someone had given him, and staring always at the small embers of a small fire at his feet. Through another native—for he had no English whatever—he told me he had seen that plant with the green and yellow leaves when he was a boy; at some place far down-coast, it was, but where exactly he had forgotten, so long ago was it. He had remembered the plant all through that long, long time; it was the fashion of the natives, he said, to remember a plant; and he remembered that one of the Old Men of those days had said that the wife of he who cut that plant would never bear a son. He had forgotten many things since then—places and names and events—ah! many things, for he was very, very old, and when a man grew old as he was, forgetfulness was easy. But never had he forgotten about that plant, for, before he was told of its strange power, he had cut

one of them down, and when at length he grew up and married there were born to him only girls.

The reason of this riot of vegetation was that the surface of the ground had recovered from the severe baking it had suffered by the burning of the felled trees and thick undergrowth, and the heavy rains had driven in the deep coating of ashes—thus fertilising the soil as never it had been fertilised before—and the everlasting heat of the sun, steaming it, had made of it all a forcing-bed.

That was the reason, simple and easy of understanding. Yet, somehow at times it seemed to me as though the jungle had resented my slaying and ignominious burning of its great trees, and was determined to slay my young palms in revenge. The attack seemed so deliberate and insistent and vicious. Those plants which the natives had never seen before were as specially created forces of assault. I felt that the jungle was behind it all; and I came to hating the jungle as I might have hated a thing of flesh and blood. I felt that it had set out to defeat me, to ruin me, to drive me away. I would look at the tall wall of it edging the clearing, and see it as a grim parent gazing approvingly down on its offsprings' attacking of my palms. I would see it as a menace, a creeping, slimy menace, stealthily advancing on my clearing. I would see it as the van of a tall army about to sweep forward in one great conquering rush. And at night in my sleep I would see it as all these things again; and worse things—the end of the attacking and the menace: I would see my poor palms all choked and dead, and my clearing so utterly gone that there was not even a break in the tangle of the self-avenged jungle to show where once it had been.

The repulsing of this attack became the most pressing need of the day. It was no easy task. Such was the fertility of the soil that almost as soon as they were cut away, the entangling vines and choking bushes thrust up

Why Weeds

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

as vigorously as before. By the time the end of clearing an area was reached, it was time to commence again at its beginning. Sometimes at the end of a full day's work there would be scarcely any sign of where the workers had been. Never were there growths of such persistence. And all the while the summer rains came drenching down—rains which were as one wide screen of grey water, and which struck the earth with such force as to bounce up to the height of a man's knees, and which made such a crashing uproar on the galvanised iron roof of my house as to make the hearing of speech impossible. And the rain blinded the labourers as they worked, and so flattened the attacking growths to the ground that the cutting of them was a matter of greatest difficulty; and many of the young palms were washed from their slight hold of the ground and swept away by torrential streams which were none the less torrential because they had been made in a minute. The salvaging and replanting of those part-drowned palms was another pressing need.

And then, just when victory against the encroaching growths was in hand, the nomadic instinct of the natives awoke, and one midday they came to me at the house, asked for the store-goods due to them as pay, and announced their intention of going away. They had been here a long time, they said, longer than any of them could remember staying in one place before, and now they were tired of it and wanted some other of their haunts a while.

"Must go for walk-about," one explained shortly when, aghast, I offered remonstrance.

"Must have spell from hard work too much," grunted another.

I stormed at them, and threatened, saying that if they went, I would never employ them again, that I would bring labourers from some other part of the coast. They made no answer, but stood staring sullenly, one or two

Summer
Rains

The
Nomads in the
Natives
revives

Really go
for Secret
Ceremonials?
And the x
Fire cere-
mony took
weeks -

muttering, and some so fingering their spears that I thought it best to let them see I had my revolver in my pocket, as I always had.

Then I spoke to them softly, and, pointing to the plantation, begged that they should not leave me just as the fruit of our recent hard labourings was in sight; and asked had I not been a good master to them, giving them in plenty of the good things in my store; and drew their attention to the fact that if they went away they would have none of these good things, and would miss them very much.

And still they stood there, a sullen, silent crowd, the women by gestures hushing their children, the men scowling up at me, the dogs sniffing in and about the array of thin, black legs.

Then I turned to Mary Brown, who had come from the kitchen and stood behind me at the head of the veranda steps. I told her to point out to them in her own language and in her own way the folly of their leaving me, to use all the arguments she knew to induce them to stay, to do her best for me, as often she had done her best for me before. Then I stood back and made room for her to speak to the sullen, silent crowd on the ground.

But Mary, who had never failed me before, failed me now. She made no speech to those on the ground, but looked at me earnestly a while, and hesitatingly and stumbly said that they would have to go—and that she would have to go with them.

It was the fashion for natives to go for "walk-about," she said, in the manner of one who excuses, but does not intend to allow the excuse to interfere with a fixed determination. Always had they been like that. Always, she repeated. With white men it was different. White men could stay long times in one place. But with natives,

Why Nomads

And their feet came tired walking always on the same ground. And their bodies came tired from sleeping always in the same camp. They wanted to look at other places, walk on other ground. They would have to go. Yes. They would go to a place three days' walk down the coast. And she would go with them, because she was one of them, and felt the same as they did—though her heart was sore that she should leave me, and the heart of Willie, her husband, was sore, too, and she would like to stay, only . . . only . . .

"But I come back," she ended. "I come back in three months—two months—and I make all them others come back then, too. . . . Please, please, Master . . . you keep this job for me. . . ."

And with that she seized my hand and pressed it to her, as a mother might press to her the hand of her child, and hurried away, her head averted to hide the swimming fullness of her eyes.

How they Go
I paid them their wages, and at sundown they left for that other haunt, whose call would not be denied, the whole of them, going as they had come—in straggling procession along the beach, the men with their spears and clubs, the women with their poor possessions bundled on their heads, the part-starved dogs trailing dejectedly. But now with the sinking of the sun, the sea was a shield of red and gold and flitting lights, and the figures on the beach stood softly clear against it, like shadows cast by a mellowed glow, with the gleaming of the sea showing between the swinging of their arms, and their heads black flat ovals cut in a sheet of gold. Then, on their winding down into a dip of the beach, the red of the sea lay on them fairly, and made of them things of mobile bronze; and the head-bundles became as red baskets of red fruits, and a cloth waved in farewell by Mary Brown a small dull flame.

I watched them out of sight, and, till the sinking of the sun was done, stared at the empty beach. Then I looked at the deserted camp and the wavering smoke of one of its dying fires, and at the plantation and the jungle's tall, grim wall, and at a rain squall sweeping up with a great rustling of leaves, and around my quiet and lonely house; and I wondered if, after all, there was anything so tremendously self-satisfying in being a Settled and Respectable Person.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE ABSENCE OF HUMANS

IT took three and a half months to sate the natives of their other haunt and bring them back gladly to labouring and consequent enjoying of white men's foods and goods; and for the whole of that time I was completely alone—save only for the companionship of Togo, my dog—seeing not one human being and having no communication whatever with the outside world.

*2m alone
3 1/2 mon*

I set out upon that period with a great fear in me. I guessed I would see no man, for I had obtained my quarterly supply of stores only a little while before, and there was no reason why another vessel should call. I was afraid of that great loneliness. I saw it as a long, long line of succeeding samenesses, broken nowhere by anything new or strange. I recalled that it was a well-observed fact that without the new and the strange the minds of men died. I recalled the parallel fact that Man was essentially gregarious. Solitude made men mad. In my far roamings I had seen many cases of it, and heard of others—of men whom need for companionship had driven to holding long and involved dialogue with themselves, with their dogs, with the stumps of trees; of men who, conversely, had lost almost entirely power of speech; of men who fled from approach of other men, as from something fearsome; of men who mingled actuality with queer imaginings and knew not how to separate them, or even that there was need to separate them. The fear in me that I might become as they was so strong that the first few nights I could scarcely sleep for thoughts

of it, and often during the day I sought to catch myself in the act of soliloquy.

Maybe the surroundings of those other isolated men were peculiarly empty of interesting things. Maybe these surroundings of mine were peculiarly full. Maybe my gregarious instinct was only partially developed. I don't know. All I know is that I found there was no long, long line of succeeding samenesses at all. I found that all about me were things so intriguing of my attention as to compensate very considerably for lack of human association. As during those weeks I was alone on Turtlehead Island I discovered that everywhere was engaging variety, so did I discover that everywhere here was engaging variety also. My solitude was filled with tragedies and comedies and dramas, with wise deeds and foolish ones, with beauties and uglinesses—just as the haunts of men were filled with them. It was a crowded solitude.

There was, for instance, the engrossing behaviour of the birds. There was one group which inhabited a tree close to the house, and which I christened "The School Kids." A dozen or more there were of them, little grey creatures, smooth of feather and a little shiny; and soon after dawn each day they would come forth and perch in a row on a conveniently horizontal limb—the largest at one end, the next largest at the other, and the rest graded according to size—and make such an uproar of quarrelling as to awaken me and send me forth to look; and at my presence, as though in deference to it, they would at once come silent, each looking straight before it and never moving. But after a while one of the little ones would begin to fidget, moving from one leg to the other, or maybe turn and face the other way; whereupon the large one at the one end would mutter disapprovingly, and the next largest at the other end vent a shrill rebuke—to both of which the rebellious one would chirp back cheekily.

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

Then others in the row would begin to fidget and turn the other way and preen their small wings and whisper noisily one to another; and the head teacher's muttering would become an angry shouting, and the lady assistant's shrill rebuking rise to a loud thin screech; and soon the whole class would be in a frenzy of screaming revolt, with much changing of places and fluttering of wings and cries of indignation, and perhaps a giggle or two. Then, after the using by the teachers of a multitude of harsh, commanding words, the disorder would die down, and the class return to its quiet and decorous demeanour—till such time as another young imp disturbed it all by fidgeting.

*The
gay laughing
jackasses*

There were birds to whom life seemed mostly one long joke—laughing jackasses—in other parts of Australia drab things of grey and white, but here gay riots of twinkling hues—which came with the rising of the sun, singly, in pairs, in scores, in any old number at all, flying from out the jungle with a great free flapping of wings and throwing laughter as they flew—laughter wholly uncontrollable, cackling laughter, giggling, chuckling, school-girl laughter, all the different kinds of laughter, obese Bacchanalian laughter, laughter that made great high crescendos, obscene laughter, choking, hissing, bursting laughter, laughter that set me laughing also, laughter that greets a smoke-room story, guttural, gurgling haw! haw! laughter—filling all the sky with it, flinging it out across the sea, making the dour jungle echo it, flooding all the world with ribaldry.

They had their quarrels, though, did those gay laughers. One morning I saw one of them, hunting alone, catch with its beak a small green snake and, laughing uproariously, carry it high up a tree, from where, according to custom, he repeatedly dropped it and caught it again before it reached the ground. Presently some of his fellows came

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and joined in the game, taking it in turns to drop and catch the snake, and enjoying themselves thoroughly the while. Then one made off with the snake, instead of returning it to the tree-top. The others for a moment were silent, as with astonishment; then came from them an outburst of indignation, and they went after the thief and, cornering him, denounced him—harshly, threateningly, accusingly, telling him he was a traitor to his tribe, one who could not be trusted, that he was no sport—and then, suddenly, one of the crowd boldly snatched away the snake and, with the others in pursuit, fled as the first thief had fled. And for the rest of the day the silence of the bush was so repeatedly fractured, in a different place each time, by an outbreak of that harsh and threatening denunciation that it seemed to me as though every one of those feathered reprobates had a turn at embezzling the snake, and that the matter remained unsettled so long as the reptile withstood the strain.

Their Game

There were birds which neither quarrelled nor laughed, indeed made scarcely any sound at all, but seemed content with a quiet revealing of a beauty and a daintiness and a grace which was theirs. Among them was a kind so small that I could have concealed one completely within my hand; yet their colours were expansive, complete, ranging from subtle greens and subtler blues to the red of oranges and to blacks with hints of fire in them, with all in between half-tones and shades of half-tones and shades of those again, and the whole so perfectly blended and matched that never was there a touch of conflict or harshness. And, as though they knew that their beauty showed not to the full in the shade, they flew mostly in the sun; and the twinkling of their wings was as in sweet rhythm to the twinkling of their hues; and when they rested among the flowering shrubs of my hedge, as often

Bird Colors

they did, they looked like flowers themselves. I called them the Birds of the Sun.

he bird of
paradise
howling off

Another decorative bird was one called the Rifle Bird,* a true Bird of Paradise, and the only one known to have a habitat outside New Guinea. In the vicinity of the plantation there were not many of them, but most of what there were lived in trees near the house; and early of a morning they would call one to another with a soft and rounded whistling; and presently one or more would come forth and perch so that the sun shone full upon them and gave life and sparkle to the great blue spread of their breasts—a blue like the blue of an old church window, but brighter—and touched with flitting red the collars of gold about their necks, and lent to the blackness of their bodies a sheen as of new coal. And there they would stay, an hour, or more perhaps, admiring themselves and one another, turning this way and that so that the light would be upon them at varying angles, holding themselves vainly, giving to each movement a deliberate grace. And I, entranced, would watch them all the while, but always from between the canes of my veranda's lattice, for despite their vanity they were keenly shy of man.

it but they
could be

There was a bird which defied all precedent and cast tradition to the dogs; a cuckoo it was—a true cuckoo,† though large as a barnyard fowl—and its revolt against things as they were was contained in the fact that, instead of, in the manner of its kind, depositing its eggs in some other bird's nest for hatching, it built a nest of its own and did all its hatching itself. It was the most independent bird of my acquaintance.

There were certain little friendly birds, cheery, cheeky, cadging birds, which took possession of a clear space of

* *Ptiloris Magnifica* Alberti.

† *Centropus Phasianus*.

ground before the house, and which became so used to my giving them scraps of food that whenever I appeared they would flutter about me expectantly, and whenever I was absent go up the steps, along the veranda, into the kitchen and steal. I came to know those birds so intimately that I gave them individual names; and they came to so regard the space before the house as their own that if a stranger appeared among them, he was immediately driven away.

"Caddling" Bird

And there were flocks of birds which came from distant lands—from Java, from Japan, from islands away to the eastward—for this was a great resting-place for birds in migratory flight; strange birds they were, some of them; birds obviously ill at ease in these, to them, foreign surroundings, and not a little afraid; birds that scarcely knew where to search for their own particular food; and birds that, because of many previous flights, knew the place so well that they stayed here quite a while.

Strangers

Once I saw two of these stranger-birds come in from across the sea—a queer pair, for one was of one species, and one of another, one being grey of feather and thick of bill, and the other blue and brown of feather and long of bill; and for a time I wondered why two such probable enemies should fly in company. Then it came to me that, stragglers from their respective flocks, they had met in their solitary flight, and determined to sink their antipathies in the need to protect themselves and one another till they came to land once more. Their arrival was the end of an epic of sorts, of dangers endured and survived; and when they dropped exhausted in the grass above the beach, I watched to see what would happen. And the only thing that happened was when they were rested a bit, first one rose, and then the other, and as casually as may be, went off in different ways in search of their long-lost flocks. A common danger had made of these

two enemies friends; and now that the danger was passed their intimacy was done.

But while I derived great interest from romantic imaginings such as these, there was always before me the plantation and the jungle's attacking growths. Those growths were a hard actuality, though by now the rains were nearly done and the attack was considerably less insistent and vicious. Sometimes I took a tool and slashed at the growths myself; but one man could do nothing against such a multitude of hostile vegetations. I consoled myself with the thought that the natives when they returned would be fresh from their long resting and be able to give to the task of clearing the palms a vigour they had not given it before.

At times, too, there came to me desire to see a human being—not an overwhelming desire; more a liking than a desire, but sufficiently strong to make me think of various populous places in which I had been, of men in thousands, and tens of thousands, of the crowds I had passed in streets, sat with in trains, in buses, in tramcars, and to whom I had never addressed a word. Here I would have talked for hours to any one of them. It seemed to me that in my time I had wasted a distressing number of opportunities of companionship.

As for Togo, my dog, he was very distinctly lonely. He didn't find interest all about him, as I did; the new and strange in his surroundings he had exhausted long before. He seemed to long for the company of other dogs—even the natives' dogs, which, though he had treated them more or less disdainfully, were at least companions of a sort, with whom if need be he could have quarrelled or fought. Now, all he could do was growl at the little friendly birds and, with a great display of ferocity, drive them away, after which he would come to me with on his face an expression which seemed clearly to ask what

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the deuce had happened to the world that a dog of his breeding and attainments was reduced to the frightening of small and harmless birds. I had never seen a dog so bored as he was.

I wrote much in my diary during that period of solitude, and also read a great deal—I had a plentiful supply of books—always for many hours at night, and often for most of a day. But my primary interest was the interest in the things outdoors. A book was, after all, merely a record of life, and often much of the record was blatantly untrue; outdoors was life itself, and all of it was vividly true.

Even the insects had intriguing aspects. In the dry sand of the upper part of the beach, between the high-tide mark and where the vegetation began, was a kind of earth-fly which lived precariously by trapping ants. The trap was a hole shaped in the manner of a wide-mouthed funnel, six or more inches across the top and only half as deep, and at first seeming was merely an accidental depression in the sand. But when it was entered by an ant, the fly, from a place of concealment at the bottom, threw up immediately a puff of sand in such manner that it fell on the ant directly from above; then it sent up other and other puffs, and flurries of puffs, and columns that went up and descended like fountains; and with all this sand falling on him the ant would be forced down and down the slope of the hole, swept off his feet, sent rolling, tumbling, staggering, battered and weak and entirely helpless to where the ingenious engineer of the contrivance awaited him. But that subterranean fly must have often gone hungry, for though the trap lay directly in the midst of thick ant traffic, only rarely did one enter it. Perhaps a word of warning had gone round among the ants.

Ant-trapping
Fly

In a clear space near the back of the house lived a

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

Ground-spider, a spider
ground-spider whose home was a tube-like hole fitted with a door on a hinge—the door being composed of grass cut into diamond-shaped fragments and bound with an intricacy of silver web. He was a little, grey person, that spider, with small eyes wrinkled like those of a querulous old man; and often did I watch him come home from his hunting of leaf-insects and the like, lift the door and close it after him, exactly as a man lifts and closes the door of a cellar. And as often I would tap the door with a tiny stick, get back out of sight and watch; whereupon the door would open a bit and the little grey person put out his head, turn his wrinkled eyes in all directions, as though wonderingly, and then, apparently concluding he had been mistaken about hearing a knock, go down indoors again. After which I would give a further knock; and this time the little grey person would come right out and make an exhaustive investigation of the neighbourhood, going even to the grass edging of his cleared space and looking behind the tufts, moving quickly, jerkily, like a man exasperated and exceedingly annoyed, the while seeming to vehemently exclaim: "Drat those boys!" and when at last he returned to his home it was as though he had determined not to be fooled again, for no amount of knocking would bring him forth once more.

pet lizard
There was a lizard with whom I became quite intimate, even to the extent of naming him George. He was a grey-brown slip of a thing, four or less inches in length, delicately graceful of body and movement both; and each morning, as I breakfasted on the veranda, he would climb the leg of the table and perch at the edge of the cloth, his head high and arched and his tongue showing from between his lips like a triangle of thin pink paper; and there he would remain without stirring—taking no heed of the various noises and movements I made—till the meal was done and I had pushed back my chair.

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Then he would immediately set to work cleaning up the crumbs, with almost incredible swiftness darting over the plates and between them, circling the saucer and the cup, making diagonal traverses of the table's whole width, flashing this way and that, his slim body twisting and curving and doubling, and the pink triangle of his tongue a skeltering spot of colour—and never once pausing a moment, but taking the food in his stride. George's exhibition of nimbleness put me always in good humour for the day, and when at last some accident befell him and he came again no more, I missed him as I would have missed any highly entertaining friend.

I became intimate with the habits and manners of many such creatures as these—creatures which hitherto I had scarcely thought of as possessing habits and manners at all. They became to me companions almost as satisfying as any humans could have been. It was not that I was interested only in the spectacular and peculiar; others of these companions of mine led lives as dull and drab as the lives of men can be dull and drab—small animals which went about their daily food-hunting quietly and without display; birds which sat unobtrusively among the trees and picked humbly at whatever fruits and berries they could find; insects which performed their commonplace tasks in a commonplace kind of way. Nor was it of any great importance to me that it was only by the exercise of the imagination that the doings of the others were as the doings of humans—that the little ground-spider was not really annoyed, that the "School Kids" were not really at school as they sat in a row on their limb. It was merely that I was viewing Life in another—and maybe truer—perspective, understanding and sympathising where hitherto I had not thought there was need to understand and sympathise at all. If only I could have attained the perspective in which the birds

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

and insects and things saw Man, my vision of Things As They Are would have been complete.

Snakes

But there were creatures with which I had no sympathy at all—snakes. At any time snakes were sufficiently numerous to make journeying through the bush a matter for carrying a stout and springy stick and keeping a wary eye. They were of all kinds and lengths. There were carpet snakes—so called because of their skin being regularly patterned—a dozen or more feet long and as thick as the leg of a man, which held no poison in their fangs, but bit as a dog might bite, and as severely, and destroyed their prey by constricting it, afterwards sliming it with saliva and swallowing it whole; in the interior of one I once shot I found the complete body of a kangaroo as large almost as a man. There were brown snakes, also of considerable length, whose bite could have fatal results within four hours; beautiful and glossy they were, and more noiseless of movement than any reptile in my experience. There were black snakes, slim and of the evenness of a piece of rope, some of them having a length of eight or nine feet, but most of them very much shorter; and tiger snakes, striped black on a red-brown background; and yellow snakes splotched with black; and several others of many colours and patterns, lengths and thicknesses, and all of them exceedingly venomous.

But though snakes were so numerous, in all the years I was there cases of people being bitten were extremely rare, the reason for this being that the snakes were timid things, which, despite their venomousness, avoided so far as they could all contact with man. "Plenty snake look you and me when we walk about, but they run 'way quick feller like hell," a native explained to me once. "'Cause man all-time fight them, they damn bloody fright' longa man. 'S'pose plenty man live this place, then no more snake." He said this, incidentally, in the tone of

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one who considered that the disappearance of the snakes would be something he would not care to see happen, for to the tribe snake was an article of diet, and the disappearance of an article of diet was distinctly a serious misfortune.

As evidence of this timidity, the snakes when the natives were about kept so almost entirely to the bush that the finding of one in the neighbourhood of the camp or the house was a matter which called from the people cries of astonishment mingled with expressions of belief that some evil-minded spirit had sent it. Now, with the camp deserted, I saw them often about the huts, and their tracks in the sand were numerous. Also, for the reason that there was now but one man present, and no comings and goings of many men, they came frequently to the cleared space about the house—came boldly, insolently, scarcely stirring out of my way when I went forth. In the third month of my solitude I shot eleven of them. But this did not deter them greatly. Indeed, some of them became bolder, coming right up to the front of the veranda and basking as casually as though contemptuous of my gun. I began to think that snakes were not so timid after all. One night one entered the house itself.

That snake provided me with one of the most dreadful experiences of my life, and with certainly the most outstanding event in my period of solitude. It was a little after midnight when it came—a dark night, it was, so close and hot that for an hour or more I had lain restlessly on my bed in the little room, naked save for a Malayan sarong, and so still was it that the lapping of the tide on the beach made a clear and rounded tinkling, and the breathing of Togo, my dog, as he lay asleep on the floor in the other, and larger room, was as a sad sighing, and all other sounds came to me isolated one from another and distinct. Suddenly I heard a slight

rustling on the Papuan mats on the floor of the other room. I threw up the mosquito-net, rose, took my gun, lit the gas and stepped to the open doorway, guessing the while what had caused the rustling.

I had only a glimpse of the other room, for the gasometer was empty, and there was only a breath of gas in the pipes, but the flicker of light was sufficient to show me, in the middle of the floor, making straight for the sleeping dog, a carpet snake a full two fathoms long. I shouted, and Togo awoke at once into barking and snapping and snarling activity and much rushing hither and thither; then the gas gave its final flicker and went out, but not before I saw the snake make for the wall and up towards the roof. Evidently it considered that while a dog asleep was one thing, a dog very much awake and filled with active antagonism was another thing altogether.

I made a bonfire of matches on the table which occupied the centre of the room. To have recharged the gasometer would have taken such a time that the snake would probably have disappeared before I finished. The bonfire of matches discovered for me the snake lying along the ridge-pole of the house; and when with a spear that hung on the wall I had poked it till its head was in such position as to allow me to get at it, I shot it—both barrels of a 12-bore shot-gun. And with that the snake's great long length came down and down, till it hung straight over the table and the flaring of the matches like a mighty rope. And then it stopped. Despite that its head was shot almost completely away, it was still filled with life and vigour, and with the end of its tail had taken a good, strong grip of the ridge-pole.

Togo sprang up on the table and sunk his teeth in it. I beat at it with the gun. I jabbed the spear into it. I was more than a little unstrung. Those long weeks of

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solitude had affected my nerves. That horrible, slightly-swaying rope was something from a place of slimy demons. In the now flickering light its diamond patternings shone like dreadful eyes; when a match exploded they gave quick and vicious gleamings. I could have screamed. I think I did scream. Blood from its shot head dripped on to the bonfire, spluttering. Snake's blood! Frenzied, I beat at its thick, long length; then I dropped both gun and spear and grasped it with my hands and pulled.

Then suddenly the thing released its grip of the ridge and came tumbling down in a mighty monstrous mass that blotted out the bonfire and splashed my face with blood; and the next moment I was hanging on to the doorpost as never I had hung on to anything before, for in falling the Thing had taken around my arm a full round turn, covering it from elbow to shoulder, and with its tail got a grip of the further side of the table in order to give it "purchase"—and was constricting with all its strength. I know I screamed now. I remember screaming, distinctly. The great coil about my arm was hard as iron, and as cold. It was a little slimy. I felt the muscles tauten against mine. The power was terrific. My arm was paralysed. My reason was paralysed. I tried to bite that awful coil. It was like biting steel. With my bare foot I tried to kick at where it stretched to the table. I tried to wrench my arm sidewise and free. I knew these efforts were futile. Still, I tried them. And all the while that cold, hard grip became harder, and seemingly colder. The pain must have been very great; but I was not aware of it. Mental shock had rendered physical shock subservient.

The Thing's half-head hung down from my arm a little way. The blood from it dripped on my foot. My sarong came off, fell on my foot and caught the blood instead. I was thankful for that. Togo was snapping at the head,

now and then gripping it and pulling. Sometimes he brushed my naked leg; and the warmth of his body felt gratifying after the coldness of the coil about my arm. I shouted words of encouragement and praise to him, though why I should have shouted them I did not know, for, willing though he was, he could do nothing.

Then, when it seemed to me I had clung to the doorpost for hours—though it was really only a few moments, as I saw afterwards by my watch—and when my arm was near the breaking, the coil began to slacken. With the pull of the snake upon it, the table was turning over. The snake was losing its “purchase.” A moment later the table crashed over, the coil slackened completely, dropped heavily to the floor, and my arm was free. I sprang into my bedroom, found some matches and struck one. The Thing was making slowly out of the main doorway, on to the veranda, Togo still hanging at its head. By the time it had reached the ground, where I could see it more or less plainly in the clear darkness, I was ready and waiting for it, and with a dozen charges of buckshot blew it to pieces. Then I recharged the gasometer, and lay in the brightness of the light till daylight, trembling as from fever or from cold, afraid to shut my eyes for fear I should see again that monstrous, gleaming rope. And for many nights afterwards I lay fitfully awake because of thoughts of it, while as for Togo, I am sure he knew full well that he himself had been the object of the snake’s intrusion of the house, for often he would awaken with a short and sudden yelp and spring up bristling, exactly as though he, too, had imagined a quiet rustling on the Papuan mats of the floor.

That experience disrupted my interest in the life about me. I felt I was a fool to live here like this. My crowded solitude was too crowded altogether. I came to hating it, and to so ache for the presence of humans that for hours

at a time I would sit on the beach and stare far down-coast at occasional smokes from the natives' fires and try to persuade myself they were a little nearer than when I saw them last; and whenever the sail of a vessel showed on the shining field of the sea, I would speculate eagerly as to whether it were coming my way. But the smokes stayed always so distant that they were as hints of cloud, and the sails passed steadily on; and I would think again of the men with whom I had sat dumbly in trains and buses and trams, and call myself a fool once more.

And then, early in the fourth month, I had an experience which made on me an impression quite as enduring as the episode of the snake, and rather more eerie besides—an experience which finally determined me to never again live an extended time far from haunts of men. It came about through an attack of my old enemy, New Guinea fever—an attack which for days I fought with quinine and other febrifuges, but which at last so overcame me as to compel me to take to bed.

It was morning when I thus gave in, and hour after hour I lay there, with the fever mounting and mounting and setting fire to my blood, and the quinine giving to my head a mighty throbbing ache, and at sundown came a merciful coma; and when I came out of it the grey of dawn was in the room, and, despite that I was feeble as a month-old child, the fever was utterly gone, and, though I was more than a little awed by the thought that for twelve full hours I had lain there in my solitude as a dead man might have lain there, I was exceeding thankful for this safe ending of a rather distressing experience.

But there was more to it than that. Some weeks later, the captain of the quarterly store-ship, sitting with me on the veranda, made passing reference to the day of the week as being Thursday. I corrected him—it was Wednesday, I said; and on his repeating it was Thursday and

declaring I must have made a mistake, I brought out my diary and showed him each day and the events of each day carefully entered. That diary was my only means of keeping positive record of the passing of the days, and I was proud of the meticulousness with which I kept it entered up. I almost felt slighted that this man should doubt it. I could have sworn he was wrong.

But he persisted, and in proof that he was right brought forth documentary evidence the truth of which there was no denying, and as further proof called up members of his crew and bade them tell me the name of the day of the week; and at last I knew there was no doubt about my diary being wrong. It *was* Thursday. From my carefully kept record a day was missing. But how that omission had come about I did not guess till some time later, when I realised that instead of awaking from the coma in the dawn of the day following the evening I became unconscious, *it was in the dawn of the day after that*. Instead of lying there like a dead man for twelve hours, I had lain there thirty-six. I had lost a day out of my life, and but for the diary would have never known it. There's something creepy in being in such circumstances that one could lose a day from one's life and never know it.

CHAPTER VII

A FATHER BY PURCHASE

THE natives returned on a day in which there was never a hint of the sun or splash of clear blue sky, but only succeeding skelters of nimbus clouds and squalls of thin hard rain, and bursts of vicious wind which scurried the sand of the beach and kicked the sheen from the sea and trampled it the hue of lead—an unhappy, angry kind of day.

But I was happy as ever I had been in my life, for I was once more among my kind, withal the most primeval of my kind, revelling in their crowding presence about the house, delighting in the flow of their voices and sight of their queer, familiar faces—the while Mary Brown was declaring earnestly, and with the emphasis of infinite repetition, she would never leave me again, and telling me most positively she had known I was ill, and known it at the time, she being possessed of the power to know such things; and babies were being shown me that I might appreciate their growth; and some of the men were presenting me with fish freshly speared, and others with bundles of jungle-fruit and yams; and I was handing out largesse in the form of tobacco to those who asked it, and also to the few who did not; and Togo was racing with the dogs he had hitherto despised, his aloofness for the time completely forgotten.

Thus, in a burst of human noises, did my fourteen weeks of solitude end; and so strange did it all seem that for hours that night I sat on the veranda and stared along the

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

beach at the camp-fires flicking holes in the darkness, as I might have stared at something extremely fascinating, but maybe wholly untrue.

The natives were as glad to be back as I was to have them back. Besides having missed their regular ration of tobacco, and the trade-goods which were their wages, they had found the wild, free life not nearly so satisfying as it once had been. In that other haunt of theirs things to eat were far less abundant than they were here in this one; and though at one time this would have mattered but little to them, it mattered a great deal now, causing them often to go hungry, for they had depended so long on being fed from my store-room, therefore neglecting their bush craft, that a deal of their skill in hunting was gone.

Further, various misfortunes had attended them. During the day of their arrival, and the next, they told me of them, now and then interrupting the telling with wails and fragments of mourning chants. One of the young men had been taken by a shark when swimming a river-mouth—taken so quickly that those on the shore saw only a flash of a fin, a downward jerk of the man's black head, and then a wide, pink stain; there was not even time for a cry.

Another of the young men had been found back a little from the beach with a spear through his chest and another in his throat—the work of a raiding bush-tribe. And according to custom they had brought the body with them, wrapped in paper-bark, the young man's father carrying the burden most of the time, but occasionally his mother lending a hand; and as the story was being told to me, the dreadful parcel lay close beside my feet, and I was hard put to it to dissuade the father from opening it in order to enlist my further sympathy by sight of the holes the spears had made.

Quick loss
of skill

Carrying the
body
in paper-bark

And one of the Old Men had been bitten on the finger by a brown-snake and his life saved only by prompt sucking of the puncture and the forcible keeping of him awake for three full days and nights, the reason for the latter treatment being that a man awake was always a man alive; and a stingaree with a width of half a fathom or more had lashed open with its sharp barbed tail the leg of a child playing in the shallows of the beach; and two of the dogs had died—this an almost as much lamented misfortune as any of the others.

And a man had surprised his youngest, newest and favourite wife in the embrace of a lover; and with fine attention to detail I was given a description of the surprising and embrace both, and a translation of sorts of various epithets hurled at the lover by the husband, which epithets were all most thoroughly obscene, and told that the reason for him hurling epithets instead of a spear was that he was aged and slow of movement, while the lover was young and strong.

*Sexual
abominations*

And a scarcely-adolescent girl had been carried off by one of the raiding bush-tribe which had speared the young man; and though, by means of a return raid, she was duly recovered, a result of her experience was that it was highly probable she would become a mother, and bring herself therefore within the ambit of the law which prescribed death to bearers of illegitimate children. But in the end no child resulted at all; and when, tremendously relieved, I remarked on this, Mary Brown replied admiringly and knowingly:

“Mother belong that girl smart woman. You understand? Ver cle-ver like anything!”

from which combination of hint and comment I knew that the girl's escape from the dreadful operation of that

dreadful law was due to a wide knowledge of abortifacients possessed by her mother.

Accidents
from Fire

They had had misfortunes which to them were subject-matter for considerable mirth. In one instance a young man had slept so close to his camp-fire that the hair from one side of his head was singed completely away, giving him an appearance so strange that he was promptly given a nickname of twenty or more consonant sounds, which, translated, meant: The Man Who Is Half Old Because He Is Half Bald—an appellation acutely resented by the young person concerned, who was rather vain and something of a favourite among the girls. But the more he resented it, the more it was used; and it was only when other words were added—words relating to the influence of age on sexual power—that he agreed to treat the matter as a joke.

Again, a man and his wife awakened one morning to find that their lean-to hut had collapsed on them in the night, and to find the whole of the tribe gathered around and making jests about the protruding of their feet from the ruined dwelling, and asking how they liked sleeping beneath a blanket of bark. They seemed to think sleeping beneath a blanket of bark an extremely funny joke. In another instance, a man had stood accidentally on a live coal from a fire, and stood there quite an appreciable time without knowing it was there, so hard and calloused was the sole of his foot. But those who saw him uttered no warning. Instead, they watched breathlessly, expectantly, awaiting the shock which would come to the man when the coal ate through to sensitive flesh. They thought this a very fine joke indeed. With such laughter that they could scarcely get out the words, they told me how he stood there, sniffing at the smell of burning and asking what caused it, and how he was told it came from a piece of wallaby roasting in the hot ashes; and how at last he

gave a most tremendous yell and a spring and began plucking frenziedly at the firey thing in his foot; and how the whole tribe burst into an uproar of laughter, and ribald comment and jeering advice, crying that they had not thought he was so poor a hunter that he could obtain nothing to eat in the bush and was therefore driven to cooking a part of himself, and telling him to take out the coal at once, before he forgot.

In that it was based on the misfortunes of others, their sense of humour was full brother to that civilised sense of humour which so appreciates a spectacle such as that of a stout, elderly, top-hatted person being cast heavily to the pavement through stepping on a banana-skin.

They had had further experiences in this eventful sojourn of theirs. They told me of a big-wind driving a pearling lugger high up on the beach near their camp, and so damaging her forefoot that it was many days before she was repaired and refloated; and of the Japanese captain and crew shooting at them when they approached; and of an agitation among one section of the tribe that they should sweep down on the strangers and retaliate, and of the firm resolve of another section that they should do nothing of the kind, for the expressed reason that clubs and spears were of little avail against guns; and of a quarrel arising between the two sections, the Yeas accusing the Noes of cowardice, and the Noes accusing the Yeas of being utter fools. By the demeanour of the men who told me this story, I judged that the quarrel was simmering still.

They gave me an account of the murder by natives of a white man at a spot three hundred miles or more from where they had camped—an account so remarkable for multiplicity of details, even to the number of the club-blows, that I thought they referred to some happening of years before. With tremendous surprise, I then learned

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that it had occurred only a few days before—the day they had left on their return.

Smoke Signal
carry
Complex tale
= Smoke
telling

The news had come to them by means of smoke-signals, they explained. The signals had gone up farther along the coast, and the makers of the signals had obtained the information from signals they had seen still farther along. The tidings had been thus relayed right from the place of the tragedy.

I questioned them closely. It seemed to me ridiculous that they should have learned all this by means of threads of smoke. I told them it was ridiculous. They shook their heads and maintained stoutly it was true. They had read the signals perfectly, they said. There was no mistake. I questioned them again and again. I asked them cunning, roundabout questions. I asked them questions so arranged as to bring forth contradictions, were there any to bring forth. But the story remained in all essentials the same; and at length I put the matter from me.

Nevertheless, the story was true. I heard it from the captain of the store-ship when it came. A tragedy had happened at the identical spot the natives had named, and at the identical time they had stated, and in the identical manner described. In newspapers brought by the store-ship I read of the stir the tragedy had made, for the victim was a well-known missionary, renowned for his courage, his largeness of heart, and the fineness of his work among the natives. I think I was the first white man to hear of his cruel slaying.

In the course of my eight years among these people, I had many examples of their ability to converse by means of smoke. Any morning I might see them make on the beach, close to the edge of the water—that being the position from where a signal could best be seen—a bright, quick-flaring fire which presently they would so overlay with green boughs that a thick grey mass of smoke went up.

Then, a man to each side of it, a wide sheet of bark was so held across the fire, and removed again, that the general uprising of the smoke was cut abruptly off, and as abruptly released; and for maybe half an hour these movements would be repeated, the periodicity of the intervals varying considerably the while. Then someone would explain to me that they were informing a neighbouring friendly tribe that, say, a son had been born to the wife of one of the Old Men, that a dance was to be held that night in honour of the event, and that three kangaroos had been speared for the feast.

Or maybe a labourer would drop his axe and look steadily a while along the shore, explaining when I asked him what he saw, that a certain man of a certain tribe had died within the hour; and, in order to prove to me that this was not merely an excuse to rest a while from his labours, he would point far down-coast to a vanishing and reappearing rod of silvered smoke.

On one occasion that distant rod of smoke gave news of a momentous kind, though I did not know it at the time. By now some of the natives had picked up from me various scraps of English, and one of these interpreted the message, and commented on it, something like this:

“Plenty fellers fight. Them people who make the smoke been hear the news from one 'nother people what been hear it from the men belong one cutter what been anchor at their camp. Plenty fellers fight. They fight like big hell, and plenty come dead. And all them fellers, they white fellers. Yes—white fellers. And they too much plenty, my word! Them people who make the smoke, they say them white fellers more plenty than the people longa their camp, more plenty than the people longa this camp, more plenty than altogether people longa altogether camps. Ah-ugh! I no' believe! It's yarn, Master—you know,

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

gammon-talk. I no' believe there's so many white fellers as all that."

I, too, inclined to the belief that it was a "yarn," an elaborately exaggerated report of perhaps a quarrel between two men on a vessel, or something of the kind; and it was not till weeks later that I learned it was true—terribly true. That pidgin-English interpretation of a message in smoke was my intimation of the beginning of the Great War.

I would have given much to know how they translated those smoke-movements into intelligibility, to know what was the code. But I never knew, for whenever I asked them to tell me they steadily refused, saying it was no use them trying to explain it, as I could never understand it, any more than they could understand the white lights of my house, which gave to night the brightness of day. But as they intimated they would consider it a favour if I allowed the matter to drop at that, I guessed that—rather than being difficult—the secret of "smoke-talking," like the reason of their carrying about with them the bodies of their dead, was a secret which, for some peculiar reason of their own, they were determined to keep to themselves.

They could converse, also, by gestures; but about this means of communication they made no secret at all, and there came a time when I was as familiar with it as they were themselves. At first sight the gestures were somewhat puzzling. But really they were quite simple.

For instance, it was the custom about midday of one of the men whose job it was to cook for the others to stand in the camp in so prominent a position that he would be seen clearly by the labourers as they worked in the plantation, maybe a quarter of a mile away, and (1) raise his hands wide apart above his head; (2) bring them down and describe a circle; (3) draw them towards



A FAMILY BELONGING TO THE VISITING TRIBES.

him as though clawing; (4) touch his breast on either side; (5) stroke the front of his legs from groin to knee; and (6) wave a hand from him. These movements meant:

Hands above head—All.

Circle—Damper (a large circular scone cooked in the coals).

Clawing—Cooking completed (the clawing represented the scratching of a damper from a fire).

Touching breast—Women.

Stroking legs—Men.

Wave of hand—Come (they beckoned by waving the hand *from* them).

Thus the message read:

"All the dampers are cooked. Women and men come."

Incidentally, I noticed that that man had a firm belief in the inequality of the sexes, for whenever it happened that the dampers were not all cooked, he omitted the women from the message.

On the way back from their other haunt the natives had collected and brought along with them various members of other coastal tribes—a score or more men, five or six women, and a spattering of children—and the coming of these people had several outstanding results.

One was that I became a father by purchase, so to speak. A day or two after the home-coming, Mary Brown came to me and asked would I like a little boy.

"He belongs to them other people, and his mother is dead, and his father not want him," she explained. "His father he not want to be bothered with him. He want kill him. Kill him—yes; like it is the fashion of men who not want baby. In his camp away there along the beach he tell me he want kill him like anything. He proper bad man, I think. I telled him no, he must not do that. It was bad, I said. Very bad. I speak that missionary

taking a Boy

and Government not like that kind of thing. But he not know anything 'bout missionary and Government. I talked him plenty. And I telled him that 'spose he bring that small boy here, mightbe you buy him. Give him plenty somethings from store. That feller greedy man, and he like plenty somethings from the store. That boy he nice little feller. 'Spose he get killed, I cry plenty. Ah—plenty.”

I had the man and his son brought to me. The child was a sturdy little chap, two years old or less, with skin glossy black and a rounded stomach which, later I found, swelled visibly when he ate. The father was a tall, thin-shanked savage, obtrusively nude, with eyebrows of astonishing heaviness and a nose so wide and flat that the nostrils were in line with the corners of the mouth—altogether exactly my idea of a man who would slay his son because he “not want to be bothered with him,” though till then I had had no idea at all of what a man who would slay his son would be like. We conversed by gestures, fragments of native speech, and translations by Mary Brown, for he knew no English at all. He didn't see any harm in killing the boy, he said, in reply to my attempts to convince him of the dreadful iniquity of the thing. He had neither the inclination nor the ability to look after him. It was a woman's job. He wasn't a woman. He was a man and a hunter and a warrior. Nursing a child was not his business.

Seeing it was useless to talk further, I took him into the storeroom, leaving the boy on the veranda, and laid on a table near him a tomahawk, a pound of tobacco, and a fathom of red cloth, and said I would exchange them for the child.

He looked eagerly at the things and examined them, turning over the tomahawk, unfolding the cloth a little, smelling the tobacco. Then he shook his head and looked



FITZHERBERT.

about him, and presently began pointing a long black finger at half the things in the room, taking them singly, shelf by shelf, indiscriminately indicating articles which would be of little use to him, such as a carpenter's plane, and articles of no use to him at all, such as a box of burners for my gas. Then he went over them again, adding a few more, and finally extended his hand wide apart above his head—the gesture meaning “ALL.”

Whereupon there burst from Mary Brown, who had followed us in, a tornado of native speech—far too rapid for my poor understanding of the tongue—but plainly denunciatory, rebuking, threatening, and other things besides; and for a full five minutes she continued it, her eyes glaring, her black face twisted with rage as never I had seen it twisted before, stamping her small black foot on the floor, shaking her small black fist in the man's face; then she thrust the tomahawk, the pound of tobacco, and the fathom of cloth into his hand and pushed him through the doorway—to which treatment he showed no resentment at all, but went meekly, uncomplainingly, like a man bewildered and not a little afraid, as any man might be bewildered and afraid after being denounced, rebuked and threatened by one of a sex from which hitherto he had had only great humility.

“He too much greedy devil!” Mary exclaimed; then the twist of rage went from her face, and, a soft smile in her eyes, she picked up the boy and placed him in my arms.

I called him Fitzherbert. He seemed to me such a comic little chap that only a comic name could suit him. There was nothing comic about Fitzherbert as a name, so far as I knew; but as applied to my purchase it was distinctly so; perhaps it was because he was so utterly unlike what I imagined a Fitzherbert would be like. But the name proved something of a trial to the natives. They found

it most difficult to pronounce. The aspirate worried them, and the "tz" sound they could not manage at all. The best they could do was "Ferberty," or "Ferbit"; and finally this was reduced to "Fit." Mary, however, disapproved of this easy snipping of the word, and upon all occasions strove to pronounce the name in full, despite that it gave her as much trouble as it did any of the others.

"I not like them make fool of name belong that boy," she said to me once, indignantly. "He not boy belong the camp, like them other childrens. He boy belong you and me."

Mary, in the bigness of her heart, had a tremendous affection for Fitzherbert. To her he was exactly as a son. She gave to him the whole of what spare time she had, besides tending his every want, making clothes for him and teaching him English from her own poor store of that tongue, impressing upon him that he was now the son of a white man and must therefore grow up like one; and each night when she returned to the camp, she carried him straddled across her shoulders, and laid him in a clean bed she had made for him in her hut. And she made Willie, her husband, teach him something of the craft of the bush and of the things of the sea, and fashion for him toy spears and instruct him in their use, and tell him tribal folk-tales and of the meaning of social institutions.

"When he grow up, he will know all about white men's ways and of black men's ways, too," Mary said to me once in explanation of this method of training. "He will be cle-ver man like anything!"

In all of this I had but little say. I was, it seemed, Fitzherbert's nominal possessor only, and had I not definitely asserted my authority I would have seen but little

of my property indeed. In fact, it was only because Mary Brown had had nothing wherewith to purchase the boy that the opportunity was mine of buying him at all. A wonderful mother was lost when it was ordained that Mary Brown should be childless.

Fitzherbert accepted the changed condition of his life with all the casualness of his race, bewailing the absence of his father not at all, making himself perfectly at home in my house, eating European foods as complacently as though never he had eaten any other, and so developing a liking for sweetmeats I obtained for him that no sooner did I appear from my room at any time than he would come toddling along the veranda to me, with in his round clear eyes a deep beseeching, and with one fat hand open and extended and the other making circular, expectant rubbings of his stomach. The only thing he disliked in this new existence of his was clothes; on every possible occasion he promptly shed the garments Mary Brown so lovingly made him, and delightedly went nude; and such was his distress when Mary reclothed him that I was impelled to order that he be allowed to please himself in the matter. With respect to covering his limbs, Fitzherbert was well and truly a savage, and he maintained this attitude for so many years that Mary nearly broke her heart about it. She would never make him all-same white man if he didn't wear clothes, she said. All white men wore clothes. She had never seen one naked. Never.

I fully expected that Fitzherbert's father would attempt to wheedle further goods from me. But he didn't. Neither did he interfere with his son in any way. In fact, during his stay at the plantation camp he took scarcely any notice of him, and after he returned to his own haunt I never saw him again. He seemed perfectly satisfied with the deal. He was the most superbly indifferent father I ever came across, and also the most nonchalant member of

a race whose almost greatest characteristic quality was non-chalance.

Another outstanding result of the coming of those other coastal people was that my natives rose against me, being stirred thereto by one of the visitors. He was a young man, broadly built and long of arm, with a head a great deal too large for his body, and an expression of face exceedingly ill-favoured. He made no offer to work a while on the plantation, as did his companions, neither did he assist my men whenever they went hunting. Instead he stayed always about the camp, gossiping with the Old Men and the women, and taking a full share of the labourers' food; and for long after the others of his tribe returned to their home, he remained there—showing indeed every symptom of becoming a fixture in the place.

For a time I made no objection to him staying. It was no business of mine if the natives chose to allow him to batten on them in this way. But one day some of the labourers came to me complaining they were not receiving sufficient food; and on inquiring I found that the shortage was due to their giving the young gentleman with the large head part of their share. It was not their fashion to see a stranger hungry, they said when I told them that this was foolish. If a man needed food, and they had it, they gave it him. The fact that the man neither hunted nor worked made no difference. It was their fashion. Meanwhile would I increase the size of their portions?

I went at once to the camp and found the cause of the trouble, and told him by means of the usual medley of speech and gesture that I definitely refused to have him on my hands as a guest, and that he was to cease forthwith sharing the labourers' food, that he was to return whence he came, and that if he didn't start immediately I would myself drive him forth—to all of which he listened in silence, though with a curious leer on his ill-favoured

face, and at the end remarked that he would leave next day. Whereupon, I nodded agreement and returned to the house, pleasantly surprised at this tame ending to what I had expected would be a somewhat troublesome affair.

But it didn't end there. Next morning there was none of the usual procession of women coming to the house for supplies of flour for the morning breakfast, and when I looked out upon the plantation not a labourer was to be seen, though they should have been at work a full hour before; and Mary Brown, when she came, was strangely ill at ease, and filled with affrighted mutterings that something was wrong, but what it was she didn't know.

"The men been talk last night—talk like anything—quiet feller among themselves," she said. "They not let me hear and they not tell me, because I good friend for you."

Again I went to the camp, this time with a revolver in my pocket. The people, grouped about their fires, took no heed of my presence, but sat silently looking one at another, or across the sea, or at the jungle, their faces sullen, frowning; my only welcome was a great barking from the dogs. I spoke to the group nearest me—spoke quietly, unheatedly, asking what was wrong that they were not at work as usual. There was no reply—only that sullen staring. More than a little uneasy, I spoke to another group, singling out various of its members, addressing them by name. Still there was no reply; and the only movement among them was that of a child trying to make towards me, and its mother's withdrawing hand. Then as I made to speak again, a man sitting by himself turned his head and looked at me defiantly, and in the tone of one who exclaims at remembrance of something long forgotten, cried loudly:

"No work! Finish work!"

and I knew definitely they had gone on strike.

I went back to the house soon after that, for I knew that in their present sullenness neither coaxing nor rebuke would be of any use. When they realised that going on strike meant going hungry, they would be ready enough to work, I told myself. But presently from the veranda I saw some of them, spears and clubs in hand, straggle out into the bush, and others make towards a fishing-pool in the mouth of the creek along the beach; and I knew that their giving-in would not be so speedy a matter after all.

On my visit to the camp I had seen nothing of the large-headed youth who had battered so freely on the labourers; but I wondered if he had had anything to do with the revolt. There seemed to me something of a connection between my ordering of him off the premises and this sudden cessation of work.

There was. A little before sundown that day, the whole of the males of the tribe trooped up to the house and arrayed themselves in the clear space in front. At their approach Mary Brown caught up Fitzherbert, who was playing near, and with her husband hurried to the kitchen. I stepped to one of the wide window-like openings in the cane screening of the veranda, a rifle in my hands, and my revolver still in my pocket, and asked what they wanted. A glance at the camp showed me the women standing watching in a group; I could almost see the strained attention of their faces; the frightened crying of a child or two came clearly.

The men were all armed, some with their spears loosely beneath their arms, others grasping them with their hands, mostly about the middle—the favourite throwing position—while one or two trailed them between their toes. Those with clubs held them menacingly by the handle. I so swung the rifle in the crook of my arm that it pointed

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towards them tentatively, carelessly, singling out no one in particular, yet ready for definite and immediate aim.

For a while we stood there, facing one another, the natives more sullen of expression than ever, I anxious, horribly afraid, filled to overflowing with the knowledge that one man would have no chance of keeping back such a horde should they choose to rush, and cursing the hour when I entered upon an undertaking containing such risks as this.

Again I asked what they wanted, and allowed the rifle-point to wander aimlessly. Then a man laid down his spear, stepped forth a pace or two and began to speak.

It was a remarkable oration. It was filled with guttural mutterings and mumblings and splutterings. It was punctuated by various wild movements of hands and feet and head. But its meaning was plain. It was a demand that I should hail the first vessel that came in sight, and go away!

The people of the Place of Many Big Trees were tired of having a white man on their ground, he said in effect. What right had the white man to take away their ground like this? It was the natives' ground. It had always been their ground. And their fathers' ground. The white man had no right to cut down and burn the jungle as he had done. No right at all. Many food-trees had the white man destroyed—white apple trees, and wangai trees—very many. They were the natives' trees—not the white man's. They wondered they had not thought of this before. It was he with the large head who had told them of it. He was a great man, he of the large head, though but a youth. And what right had the white man to tell that same youth to go away? It was their camp—not the white man's. They could have in their camp who they liked. It was too much. They were determined to drive the white man away.

The crowd greeted this speech with many "Ah-ughs!" and other noises intended to signify appreciation, and when the speaker was done there burst from them a welter of strange cries, accompanied by much thudding of clubs on the ground and the rattling of spears. Many of them surged forward. There was a vicious gleaming in their eyes. A laughing jackass giggled from a tree near by. In the kitchen Fitzherbert was crying and Mary Brown crooning to him. I raised my rifle, fitted the butt to my shoulder and took deliberate aim at the nearest of the crowd.

And with that those in front shrunk back, while the man at whom I aimed turned and dived back through them; whereupon I realised gladly that by reason of the fact that no one was willing to be in front, there was not likely to be any rush. And neither there was, for after a time they drew away from the house and went straggling off to their camp, though not before various menacing speeches had been hurled at me and I had made decisively toned threats in return.

That night was a dreadful night to me, also to Mary Brown and Willie, for they went not to the camp, but stayed with me instead, for fear of what might happen to them for being my great friends. We lay on the mats of the floor, the three of us—Fitzherbert being put to sleep in my bed—with all lights out, and keeping very still—and listening, listening, listening. For my part, I heard all manner of sounds charged with menace. Never, it seemed to me, had there been a night so filled with small and menacing sounds. I heard them continuously, the ordinary sounds of the jungle night, distant sounds and near sounds and nearing sounds, and sounds born of a mating of fear with strained intentness of the senses; and all of them as sounds of stealthily approaching blacks. And I knew Mary Brown and Willie heard them, too.

The night passed, slowly, infinitely slowly; and with the coming of dawn I slept as seldom in my life I had slept, the while Mary and Willie took turns at keeping watch; and at midday when I awoke I hailed the natives as they idled about the camp; and when they came—suspiciously, haltingly—I made parley with them, telling them they were right in saying I had no right to their land, though the Government man at Thursday Island had told me the land was mine and given me a paper, stamped with a great red seal, to that effect. It wasn't the Government man's land to give, I told them. They were the real owners, and the best thing I could do was buy the land from them. What did they think of that as a way out of the difficulty.

They thought it a very fine way out indeed, and at my invitation the chiefs followed me into the storeroom to receive payment at once, the amount of which they left entirely to me, but suggested two pounds of tobacco as a fair thing. Whereupon; in order to make a good fellow of myself, I gave them tobacco to double that quantity, added a half-dozen sheath-knives, a roll of cloth and one or two other things—all of which they took without expression either of gratitude or delight, but carried them outside and shared them with the others forthwith; and never again was there any dispute as to who was the owner of the land.

As for the youth with the outsize in heads, he begged what he could of the tobacco and things I had paid, and that day returned to the place of his own tribe, and troubled me no more. While as for the night I had feared the natives' attack—I discovered long afterwards that they, too, had stayed awake hour after hour, listening, watching, armed, and ready. They were afraid that I would attack them!

Sold the
land
for -

CHAPTER VIII

BILLY NUMBER FIVE

IN so far as it was a matter of clearing, and planting, and fighting back jungle growths, the second year was a replica of the first.

But it was a much more satisfactory year. The area cleared was twice as great—mainly because the natives were now far more familiar with axes and other tools, though still far from completely familiar with them. The jungle growths' attack was less than half as fierce—result of our persistent counter-attack being aided by partial failure of the rains. And the number of the palms planted was so many that the cultivated area extended inland for more than a quarter of a mile and for twice that distance paralleled the beach—a not very large area as plantation areas go, but one which gave me considerable satisfaction nevertheless. I felt a Settled and Respectable Person more than ever.

Then, too, there were but little of the trials and difficulties of those earlier days. Never again was I left wholly alone. The natives still went on their wanderings, but never did the whole of them go at once. They went in batches, of a score or more perhaps, and going rather hesitatingly at that, for by now they had become so accustomed to European foods and goods that voluntarily doing without them was not a matter to be lightly undertaken. Their nomadic instinct, powerful though it was, was trammelled by their new desires and need to satisfy those desires. One of them told me wistfully of his idea of an ideal existence:

"'Spose I all-time got them things you give me, then I all-time walkabout,"

and another remarked that it was strange that I, actually having these coveted things in abundance, should be content to remain so long in one place. All of which caused me to speculate whether, in being responsible for the implanting of those desires and needs, I was not guilty of a social wrong. There may have been something altruistic in raising a people a little from the depths of a great primitiveness. There was something definitely immoral in destroying their peace of mind.

Mary Brown was true to her promise never to leave me again. But the wanderlust tugged strongly at her at times; more than once I saw her watching the departure of a batch of the tribe, waving to them farewells profoundly wistful, gazing up the beach long after they had passed from sight, the light of a great desiring in her eyes the while; more than once after such a departure was her cheerfulness for a time displaced by an air of dissatisfaction, and restlessness, and periods of glum silence. I think that but for an order I had given that Fitzherbert was never to be taken on any of these wanderings, she would have gone at least once. I don't think her fidelity to me would have been equal to the strain. But she could not endure to be parted from Fitzherbert. Her love for that child of my purchasing was stronger than the power of the mighty nomadic instinct.

But Willie, her husband, went upon almost every occasion. Save only in the matter of changing his name, Willie was affected by the civilising influence less than any of the others—this despite that he was brought into closer contact with it, having a wife whose outlook was considerably European, and spending most of his time at my house. Willie was a thoroughly conservative

savage. So far as was possible, he allowed nothing to interfere with his primeval urgings. He liked Fitzherbert immensely, and he liked the European foods and goods quite as much as the rest of the tribe liked them. But he did not allow these likings to override his nomadic instinct. If it occurred to him to join a party setting forth, he neither hesitated nor thought of the future, but joined it forthwith, making a head-bundle of whatever of his few possessions lay to hand, and grunting a farewell to his wife and Fitzherbert, and informing me:

“ Mightbe I come back sometime,”

by which doubly indefinite statement he meant that his absence would be purely temporary.

And Mary would watch him go in the same sad manner she watched any of them go; but her period of depression would last longer; and when I tried to cheer her, saying he would surely return and that quickly perhaps, she would reply that she knew that, and confess a fear that maybe he would be attracted to some other woman in his journeying, a younger woman and more handsome than she, there being many such, and add despondently that her limbs were thin and her breasts quite flat, that she was getting old . . . so old. . . .

Then at length she would brighten and become her cheerful self again, saying light-heartedly that it would be a peculiar woman indeed who would look admiringly upon this wandering husband of hers, he being entirely unattractive in every way and having a most unbeautiful habit of screwing up one side of his face, besides being nearly as old as she was herself. And with that she would put the matter from her till such time as the wanderers returned, when she would question closely the women and

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SOME OF THE YOUNG PALMS.

others of the party as to her husband's conduct. But never once was there even a breath of suspicion against him. I think he was as fond of his wife as ever a savage can be fond of his wife, and respected her besides, and was always faithful to her.

By the end of the third year the plantation was made—that is to say, I cleared and planted no more, but gave all my attention to tending the palms, of which there were now five thousand or more, all of them flourishing even more sturdily than I had hoped they would flourish. The converting of a black man's jungle into a white man's garden was accomplished. It was a matter now only of waiting for the palms to fruit, meanwhile keeping them clear of weeds and interfering growths. Life became easier and more comfortable for me. I looked forward to five years of such comfort and ease, when the gathering of the harvest would begin.

In my wilding days such a prospect would have appalled me. In five years of waiting for a harvest I would have seen only dreadful inaction, dreary monotony. The daily routine of serving out rations and overseeing hoeing and weeding would have driven me near to frenzy. But I was a wilding no longer. Assuredly I was a wilding no longer. I liked comfort and ease. The restfulness of the agricultural life appealed to me. I developed the agricultural habit. The growth of the palms interested me tremendously. I watched them as intimately as a suburban dweller watches the flowers in his tiny suburban garden. The fact that a certain palm had at last thrust forth its fifth frond interested me more than the fact that I lived in one of the least-known parts of the world. The knowledge that a palm had grown so sturdily that already its bole was pushing above the ground was more to me than the knowledge that I, a product of modernity, mingled hourly with people ten thousand years, and more, behind

the times. I gained an agricultural perspective, so to speak.

I had now far more labour than I needed, for with only hoeing and weeding to be done, less than half the tribe were employed. And the surplusage was increased by the coming of tribes from other parts of the coast—tribes of a score or less, tribes of a hundred or more—tribes which came merely on a wandering, tribes which came from curiosity to see the white man's garden, which by now was the talk of all the beaches; and while some of them stayed a week or two only, some of them stayed for months; and always when they departed various of their numbers remained behind—some because they had formed attachments with girls and women of my tribe, some because they couldn't be bothered to shift, some for no discoverable reason at all. So many were there of them that among the trees fringing the beach a second camp was formed, and eventually a third. The Place Of The Many Big Trees became a populous centre. It contained more people than ever it had contained before, and more were arriving all the while.

And as is usual in populous centres, there arose the problem of everyone obtaining a sufficiency of food. So many were the hunters that game grew exceedingly scarce; indeed there were more hunters than game. The jungle was a supplier of vegetables and fruit, but not for such numbers as these. The sea was abundant with fish, but only for certain periods of the year, and those periods were widely apart. The new people were driven to begging from me whatever they could, and to sharing in the rations of my labourers, which sharing sent the labourers to me for increased supplies and made for such general dissatisfaction that at length I advised the strangers it would be much to their advantage if they returned whence they came.

But they were not at all anxious to go, nor were my people anxious for them to go, being essentially gregarious and fond of numbers. I did not press the matter; I saw that the departure of the strangers would unsettle my people somewhat, and I did not want to unsettle them in the least. Instead, I conceived an alternative—that of inducing them to grow their food; and one night I went to the camp to make revelation of a plan I formed to this end.

That night stands out in my memory. I had intended to put the matter to one or two of the chief men and leave them to explain it to the rest of the tribes, to merely, so to speak, implant the seed of my idea and allow it to fructify of itself—the most successful means I knew of inducing these people to accept an innovation. But when I reached the camp I was seized with the knowledge that this was far more than a mere relieving of a pressing food question. It had a deeper and a wider significance than that. It had a tremendously important social significance. I was about to attempt changing the chief habit of a people whose chief habit was far older than recorded history. I was about to attempt bridging the ages-wide gap between nomadism and husbandry, between living by the chase and living by the hoe, between thriftless wandering and responsible industriousness. I was about to attempt persuading a whole people to accept their heritage of the earth. This was no matter to be given forth at second-hand by one or two chiefs. It was too big an innovation for that. I flamed with desire to tell the people myself.

Some of them were gathered about their huts, some asleep on their faces, their folded arms for pillows, their dull black bodies as smudges on the greyness of the sand; others sat in idly talking groups; others, spear in hand, paraded the beach in search of small fish seeking the

shallows. On my calling to them, they came wonderingly and formed in an irregular ring about me in the centre of the camp, the men in front, the women behind, the children all over the place. Here and there a small uncertain fire blinked like a sleepy eye. The scent of wood-smoke wandered vaguely on the still air. A screen of white clouds hid the zenith moon, and with edgings of brightest silver revealed that she was there. The sea was a carpet of softest purple and the beach its wide grey border. The irregular ring of the natives was as an enclosure of strangely substantial shadows.

*Changing a
race from the
Hunter to the
Planter*

I gave myself whole-heartedly to my task. I began with a dissertation on improvidence. It is difficult to deliver a dissertation on improvidence in a language made up of gestures, an English of a kind, and scraps of an exceedingly limited native tongue; but I did it. I rubbed it in about improvidence, giving various illustrations of its grievous effects, and of the foolishness in general of taking no thought for the future, but first explaining what the future was. I proceeded then to the evil of wandering, and from wandering to the evil of living by the chase or by whatever lay to hand, asking them to recall the weariness of resultless huntings, the hungers they had endured, the constant alternation between being well-filled and starved—by pantomime I showed them the hunter on a successful day as a person with a stomach aggressively protruding, and the hunter on an unsuccessful day as a person straight up and down as a spear. For maybe half an hour I continued in this strain.

Then I paused for comment or appreciation, if any. There was none; the only sounds were the sudden crying of a child and the snarling of a pair of dogs. The moon rent the screen of white clouds and made of the carpet of the sea a silver plate and laid on the ground a tracery

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of branches. The enclosure of strangely substantial shadows was spotted with the shine of eyes.

I then spoke of the advantages of growing food instead of haphazardly seeking it. The earth, I told them, was theirs for the using, and if they chose to use it they would never go hungry again. I said I would help them in every way I could. I offered to give them a piece of my cleared land, and to lend them tools with which to till it, and to supply them with various cuttings and seeds, and to teach them plant and tend them. I enthused on the number and size of the things they could grow. I gave wings to description and let exaggeration run free. I described bunches of bananas taller than I was, sweet potatoes thicker than my leg, yams larger than my head. I mimicked men bent double carrying home the harvest, women staggering beneath loads of it, children with their arms burdened full. I indicated piles of food as high as a tree and higher, and huts so filled with edibles that their owners slept outside, and drew a gesticulated picture of a condition wherein every night was a feasting night and everyone's stomach protruded aggressively all the time. Then I dramatically ceased and asked what they thought of it.

At first it seemed that my gymnastic oratory had thoroughly failed to impress them; they just sat there silently as ever, and scarcely moving, the moonlight showing their expressions as seemingly sullen. But presently one spoke to his neighbour, then another and another, and a great chattering arose among the women, and a youth opined loudly that an abundance of food such as I had described would be a most excellent thing, and a number of the others called corroboration of that opinion and declaration that they had thought out the matter carefully, and various of them rose and crowded about me, mostly all talking at once, some stating they were fools not to

have thought of such a plan themselves, some asking if I could let them have the land at once, and all of them wedging in remarks to the effect that I was a darn' good fellow indeed.

I had not expected such prompt appreciation. At best I had expected they would agree to consider the matter at their leisure among themselves, that it would be necessary to lecture them again and again, that the inducing of them to so completely change their way of life would be a task needing considerable pains and time. This ready response gratified me exceedingly. It was, I felt, a tribute to my power of oratory. By a speech of an hour I had converted a community of nomads into a community of husbandmen. Sitting on my veranda that night, listening to the voices of the natives talking eagerly of the well-fed existence which was to be theirs, I told myself I had achieved something very remarkable indeed.

I was soon to discover I had done nothing of the kind. They were the worst farmers that ever were—though they were quick enough to use the land I gave them, working it enthusiastically, digging and planting even through the hottest parts of the day. Instead of awaking an agricultural instinct, I found there was none to be awakened. They planted, but with that considered there was no more to be done; the routine of weeding was abhorrent to them, as all routines were abhorrent to them. They could not await the ripening of what they planted; the yams and sweet potatoes they dug up almost as soon as formed. Their enthusiasm waned, and finally died. One by one they abandoned their plots of land, taking no heed of my remonstrating or advising, but declaring (1) the things took too long to grow, and that hunting was quicker; (2) they didn't like such constant work; (3) it was not their fashion. They returned to sharing my labourers' rations and to begging what they

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could from me; and when they discovered that I was steadfast in my refusal to accede to their demands, the majority of them made a camp a few miles down the coast, where jungle foods were more or less abundant. My grand scheme had utterly collapsed. As an uplifter of primitive peoples I was a thoroughly complete failure.

About this period it came to me that I should have an overseer. The work being now mainly a simple routine, the only reason for my continual presence in the field was to see that the labourers kept at their tasks—and another could do that quite as well as I. Besides, overseers were outstanding features of plantations. Who ever heard of a plantation without an overseer? Attending to such details as supervising labourers at their tasks should be beneath my dignity as a fully developed Planter. It should be mine to attend only to the Higher Management and to matters of policy. As The Master, The Big Boss, I should be a languid gentleman who rose late, strolled casually a while about the property, and spent the remainder of the day in a lounge-chair on the veranda. Most certainly I should have an overseer. To be without at least one was not like being a Planter at all.

I offered the post to the apparently most intelligent of the labourers, and one who was something of a leader besides. I explained that he would perform no manual labour himself, but only see that others performed it, and I promised that, in view of his raised estate, I would pay him two sticks of tobacco extra each week and supplement his rations with such coveted articles as a tin or two of fish, cups of sugar, a pot of jam.

He accepted with profound enthusiasm. That would be good-one job, he declared. No work like hell—only

watch them other poor fellers work—and all-time have plenty flour and tobac' and—my word!—tin' fish! That was proper good-one job! He would never come tired of job like that.

He proved completely unsatisfactory. He had no sense of mastership whatever. That he was invested with authority meant nothing to him. He allowed the labourers to come late and depart early, to rest as often as they wished and for as long as they wished, to sleep away whole afternoons perhaps. Who was he to rebuke them? was the burden of what he said when I reproached him. They were his own people, his brothers, his friends. He could not speak harshly to them. They would think him a hard and cruel person, and dislike him. And he doubted if they would obey him, anyway, for he was not really a Master, but merely one of themselves. I explained to him carefully and at considerable length that in having my authority behind him, he had the same power as I had, and ordered him to use it; and to the labourers I explained it all over again, and ordered them to obey. But it was of no use, and after a time I reduced the overseer to the position of labourer again—which reducing he accepted cheerfully enough—willingly almost—his only regret at the loss of his higher estate being the loss of increased rations and tobacco.

At various periods I tried others of them—half a dozen of them, including two of the Old Men, and a strapping young person reputed a gifted leader in time of battle. None of them was of the least use; and at length I came to understanding of the fact that it was contrary to the communalism of their lives that one of them should be raised above the others by an agency outside the tribe. The only power one of them had over another was wholly within the tribe, and was either



BILLY NUMBER FIVE.

inherited or earned—inherited, as in the case of chieftainship; earned, as in the case of prowess in battle or in hunting. Power from an extraneous source was not recognised as power at all. My nominating of an individual as a person of authority meant nothing whatever; as a maker of rulers I had no standing. In view of this, I abandoned the attempt to make one of them an overseer, and resumed my personal supervision of the labourers at their tasks.

Some time later, however, I obtained a quite excellent overseer. When I returned from the plantation one afternoon, I found sitting on the veranda steps a native I had never seen before—a strongly built man, he was, maybe forty years of age, dully black as the rest of his race, but much sharper-looking and more intelligent of expression, and dressed in trousers, shirt, and a hat, none of which had the “cast-offs” appearance which clothes worn by natives usually had, but were quite new and well-fitting. At sight of me he rose, came to meet me, took off his hat politely, held out his hand and remarked in quite good English that it was a fine day.

Then he said his name was Billy Number Five, but if I liked I could call him Charlie, or Tommy, or Henry, or anything at all. He didn't mind. He'd been called all those names at one time or another—and other ones, too—not such nice ones. The white men he'd worked for called a native by the first name they thought of, but they liked Billy best. Lots of natives were named Billy. Among the crew of a lugger he'd worked in were six Billys, and, so's he know which was which, the captain gave them numbers besides. He was number five. That was a long time ago; but the name had stuck to him. Perhaps I'd better call him Billy Number Five. He was more used to it, like.

I made some commonplace remark, and asked him what he did here, and how he came here, and what he wanted. But I did not address him in the rough-and-ready manner in which I addressed the labourers. This native's manner and bearing were as the manner and bearing of a white man. I had an uncomfortable feeling that I was not speaking to a native at all, but to a kind of white black-man. That a native should speak English with such ease and fluency, disconcerted me somewhat. I had so long been accustomed to wild and uncouth blacks that it was almost as if I believed there was no other kind of black.

He made no direct answers to my questions, but, looking across the plantation and then at the house, remarked I had a damn' fine place here, and that he wouldn't mind taking a job from me, if I had one to give him. He'd worked for whites all his life, he went on. He'd been born and reared close to a settlement. He worked in cutters and luggers—pearling and all that. He'd been at all kinds of jobs, even on a farm—milking cows. Not much of a game, that. Too constant. Too much Sunday work. He liked to be free of a Sunday, if he could. No; he wasn't religious, or a mission man, or anything. Missions was no good to him. But Sunday was a day of spell, when a feller liked to put on his best pants and all that, and stroll about the township. But milking cows was not as constant as the last job he'd had. A month ago, he'd signed on for a year in the stokehold of a small steamer running the coast—a cargo ship. It was a rotten job. Damn' rotten.

"I chucked it at Thursday Island," he said. "It was too hot down there in that stokehold. And dirty! I was black with coal all over. And the engineers was always goin' sore on me. You should 'a' heard them! It was all the time: 'Billy Number Five, you black bastid, where

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BILLY NUMBER FIVE'S HOUSE.

are you?' 'Billy, if you don't trim the coal better than this, I'll ram some of it down your bloody throat.' 'Billy, shake it up there, blarst you!' Billy—Billy—all over the place. Talk about a constant job! It was too constant for me. You'd 'a' thought I was running the flamin' engine room! It was no good to me. Two nights ago I cleared from her, got a passage in a cutter coming this way, and landed a coupler miles along the beach there. I don't reckon they'll come looking for me. Glad to get rid of me, I 'spect. The old woman who cooks for you told me you wanted someone to work your niggers. How'll I do?"

I appointed him on trial, but very soon took him on permanently, for he proved a most efficient overseer. Despite that he was as full-blooded a native as any of the others, he had none of their belief in the impotence of conferred power. His long association with whites had knocked such ideas out of him completely. He had no difficulty in making the natives work. He liked being a Boss. He revelled in his vesture of authority. As in the stokehold he had been cursed by those above him, so now did he curse those beneath him. But there was no real sting in his curses, and his anger was oftener pretended than not; and the labourers knew it, and resented his seeming harshness not at all, but seemingly were all the cheerier for it.

Billy Number Five became one of the fixtures of the property. Like me, he discovered he was tired of roaming and that the settled life was the life for him. He married one of the girls of the tribe—the girl who had been captured by the bush-tribe and had been in considerable danger of being done to death as the bearer of an illegitimate child—and I had erected for them a small house a little distance from my own. Billy

furnished the house in white-man fashion, and patiently instructed his wife in white-man ways, and loved her so devotedly that he was wont to declare that if ever a missionary should come this way, he would ask him to marry them properly with ring and paper.

Despite his civilised attributes, however, Billy in certain respects was entirely a native. Dear to him was the native habit of squatting about the camp when the day's work was done, and gossiping over the events, and droning fragments of chants, or maybe staring aimlessly out across the sea; the earlier part of each of his evenings was usually spent thus. He joined always in the dances, giving himself to the sensual swayings and leapings and prancings with all the abandon with which the others gave themselves to them, the while savagely roaring the four-note song. And, though he affected to me to mock at such legends and beliefs, I had various convincing proofs that he really believed in the existence of the Listening Trees, — and that the story of the God Without a Job was a — true story, and that various wholly incredible myths were faithful narrations of facts. In these respects the influence of his heredity was far too powerful for the influence of a superimposed civilisation.

Life was for me now easier and more comfortable still. I had an overseer, and the plantation was therefore a real plantation, and I was a real Planter who could be the languid gentleman as much as I wished. The virtues of the settled life appealed to me more than ever, and with increasing puzzlement I wondered I should have found in roaming any satisfaction at all. Wandering from place to place, trying occupation after occupation, seemed the most futile and footling existence possible. I was convinced I was born for the life I now lead. I had a plantation, a house, furniture, an overseer, a cook,

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a crowd of workmen, and a son of sorts. Never before had I had anything like so many possessions. The pleasure of acquisition was mine. I was an extremely self-satisfied young person indeed.

There was, however, little of the monotonous about my existence. This place of mine was still a place of adventure. I was still in a land of savages, a land where something was always liable to happen. In fact, there was always something happening. My tribe quarrelled much with those of the strange tribes who remained—quarrelled usually about women, quarrelled bitterly, brutally, with spear-thrusts and club-blows following their shouted exchange of insult and obscenity. And the quarrels were seldom confined to the principals, but extended to people more or less indefinitely concerned, and to some maybe not concerned in the original dispute at all, so that for hours on end the whole camp would be in uproar; and for fully half of the following day I would be kept busy tending their innumerable bruises and cuts. On one such occasion the disturbance threatened to become so serious that, accompanied by Billy Number Five, I was compelled to arm myself and go to the camp and quell the uproar by the only means I knew—forcing the principals at revolver-point to the house and tying them to the veranda posts till such time as their hot anger was somewhat cooled. This treatment they resented afterwards not at all; indeed, I think each was secretly gratified that the offensive propensities of his enemy had been rendered powerless. In their normal, unheated state of mind, these people were curiously afraid of one another; they would, in fact, go to all manner of pains to avoid giving such offence as would lead to a quarrel. It was only when their blood was up, when stirred by a real, or imagined, wrong that they didn't care what they did.

These quarrels, however, were as nothing compared with a tribal war they indulged in—an attack on the bush-tribe which had slain the young man whose body was found in the jungle with spear-holes in his chest and throat, and which had stolen the girl who was now the wife of Billy Number Five. The bush-tribe, in the course of its wanderings, had camped within a half-day's journey of the plantation, and one of my men when hunting saw them from a hill-top and hurried back to report.

Despite my remonstrances and the bullying commands of Billy Number Five, an attack was promptly decided upon. Those bushmen were their hereditary enemies, I was told in effect, and this was too good an opportunity to miss. Always did they fight bushmen when they could. Always. Besides, had not this tribe killed the young man and stolen the girl?

That night there was a strange quiet in the camp. There was neither dancing nor singing of war-songs, as I had expected there would be. Mary Brown explained to me that this was because they wanted to surprise the bushmen.

"Them bush fellers walk about plenty in night-time, and might be they hear if people belong you and me sing war-songs. 'Spose they hear them, then to-morrow they gone."

In another attempt to dissuade them, I went again to the camp. The fires had all been carefully extinguished—in case any of the night-wandering bushmen should see. The women were in the huts, chanting disjointedly. By the light of the stars men were smearing their bodies with white clay and white ashes, and with tree-gum sticking feathers on their arms and in their hair. Some had whitened their faces, but had so left circles about their eyes that they appeared to be wearing dark

grotesque spectacles. Some had so smeared red ochre on the white smearing of their bodies that they were as though splashed with blood. One whose face was so overlaid with white and red markings that he seemed to be wearing a mask was sharpening a number of spears with a flint. There was a sinister determination about his movements.

There was a sinister determination about the movements of them all. No one answered me when I spoke; they took no heed of me at all. I was completely ignored, and the ignoring was of a quality which was decisive warning that it would be much to my advantage if I refrained from interference. It was plain also that it was only with great difficulty that they maintained their quiet. Everywhere was apparent a tremendous tension; if only one of them had broken into a loud war-chant, I am sure the whole of them would have been transformed in a moment into a crowd of frenzied, yelling demons. The tension, the unnatural quiet, the darkness, the disjointed chanting of the women gave to the scene a peculiar eeriness.

There was nothing I could do. Neither threats nor cajolery were of any avail. I returned to the house; and all that night lay awake thinking of those hideous painted faces and bodies, and listening vainly for some sound to disturb the ominous silence of the camp. At dawn I rose, went out on to the veranda, and watched for their departure.

With the rising of the sun they came out from the camp—about forty of them all told—each with his clubs and spears so held that they made no rattling one against another; and, walking in single file, they struck across the plantation straight inland, the dull dead whiteness of their bodies in sharp relief to the sunlit greenness of the palms; then they entered the jungle and disap-

peared. Back in the camp the women stood grouped, watching, their small children straddled on their hips, the others clinging about their legs. There came to me sound of a high-pitched wailing, and a long-drawn howling of dogs.

It was two days before they returned, and for the whole of that time there was no news of them. I think I was as anxious as any of their women. I discovered that I had quite an affection for them. I forgot their various revolting and disgusting practices. I forgot they were red, raw savages. I remembered that they were in the habit of affectionately acclaiming me in song. I remembered that it was their hands which had made this satisfying plantation of mine. The fact of their being in danger brought them closer to me than ever they had been before—closer indeed than ever I had thought they could be.

More than once I thought of following them, and at least trying to persuade them to return. But the knowledge of how useless it would be deterred me. No power short of overwhelming force could induce war-excited savages to abandon an attack. They would recognise no other persuasion.

They returned in the night-time—about midnight—returned with an exultant shouting and singing and yelling which announced their coming for long before they appeared. And the moment they reached the camp there began a great singing of victory songs and a wild mad dancing which continued all that night and the next day and the day after that, a dancing and a singing in which Mary Brown joined as vigorously as any of the others, and in which Billy Number Five was often a leading performer.

But they spoke to me little of what had happened away there in the bush, beyond remarking briefly that

they had been victorious in their attack. Each time I questioned them on the subject they pretended not to hear or understand, and even Mary Brown answered vaguely to the effect that she had heard no details.

But when at last the festivities were done and work was resumed once more, there were two of the labourers missing, and though I was told when I asked that they had gone on a visit to another tribe I made guess as to what was wrong; and some time later I found in one of the huts, lying side by side, two ominous-looking bundles of paper-bark wrapped tightly with shredded jungle-canes, and knew that my guess was right.

CHAPTER IX

SOME VISITORS

JANUARY of the fifth year was a momentous month—it saw the coming into bearing of one of the palms. I had not expected reproduction so soon; not till well into the seventh year was it usual for a planter to have his eyes gladdened by such a sight. This quick fruiting was extremely gratifying. It was token of the fructivity of the soil of this place of mine, and of remarkable suitability of conditions in general for coconut-growing. It made of the future a thing burthened with promise. It was definite confounding of those who had believed my venture sure to fail.

That palm gave me a special delight. It was to me like a child. I knew it more intimately than I knew any other of the palms, for it grew nearest of all to the house—indeed, within five yards of it—and right from the time of its planting it had been daily beneath my eyes. I had watched every stage of its growth from a raw uncertain stripling to a buoyantly beautiful adolescent. I had seen the slow unfolding of every one of its fronds, each longer and wider than the rest, seen them make their downward curvings till in their numbers they were an encircling drooping, seen them extend till the lower ones swept the ground and the higher ones swished my roof. Often in my wanderings had I seen young palms like this, but never, it seemed to me, one so beautiful. I took photographs of it as I might have taken photographs of something beautiful beyond expression and strange and new besides. I took portraits of its

clustering fruits as I might have taken portraits of a beloved child. It was more of a child to me than was Fitzherbert. I had bought Fitzherbert; but I had made that palm.

From now on my isolation was considerably less extreme. My place was becoming known, and scarcely a month went by without some Thursday Island boat or other bringing me at least one visitor. I enjoyed these visits immensely. I was no longer fully contented with interest in the things about me. I wanted companionship of my kind, to talk on subjects entirely unconnected with natives and agriculture, to hear and discuss the happenings of the outer world—that is to say, of Thursday Island, which wasn't much of an outer world, being merely a speck of rock smaller than the area of my plantation, but to me a Centre of Things. Besides, I liked to play the host. As a Settled and Respectable Person, as a Planter with an overseer and a crowd of workmen, it was befitting that I played the host.

A thing I noticed about my visitors was that each seemed a remarkably clear-cut personality. They appeared to stand right out of the community of men as I had known it. There was about them nothing of the commonplace at all. Yet I knew many of them for most ordinary individuals, remarkable for nothing in particular—just the every-day persons one passes in a crowded street and never notices. For a long time I puzzled over this. Then I understood that while one notices a crowd without noticing its component individuals, here in the solitudes one gave to individuals such concentration of attention that various small and inconsequential characteristics were not only apparent, but highly magnified and exaggerated.

Some, however, were interesting in their own right. One or two were famous. There was one whose life-work

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

The Anthropologist comes
was the study of the races of mankind—he was the holder of the Chair of Ethnology at a great American University—one who in the investigation of material at first-hand had been in many strange and scarcely accessible places, and was possessed of a remarkable collection of anecdotes relating to those places, but because of the depth of his interest in his work, could seldom be induced to relate them. He talked folk-lore and migrations and heads—dolicocephalics, brachycephalics, all kinds of heads. If ever there was a man alight with the fire of enthusiasm it was he. He was glad of an audience, of someone to whom he could expound his theories. He stayed with me two months, and there was scarcely a night in the whole of those two months when he did not treat me to a most illuminating dissertation on some phase or other of mankind as it was, is, or would be. It did not occur to me as strange that far away there in the wilds I should be listening to the discourse of a famous scientist. I think I scarcely thought of the famous aspect of it at all. I knew only I was in the presence of a man wholly in love with his job.

As for the natives, they didn't know what to make of him at first. When he began measuring their heads, they were somewhat afraid of him. When he spoke to them of their legends and mythology, they thought him unduly curious, and were not a little resentful. Some of them complained to me, asking what had their heads to do with him, or the tales they had learned from their fathers. But at length they accepted him cheerfully enough—for the reason, I discovered, that Billy Number Five had privately informed them that he was completely mad. They had a most curious respect for madness and were therefore content to allow him to do what he wished with them. I would have liked to tell the Professor this reason of their acquiescence, but didn't dare. A man so

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wholly in love with his job was not likely to appreciate a joke like that.

Another scientific visitor was an ornithologist of world-wide experience who had been attracted to Cape York by reason of the fact that not only was it a common resting-place for all manner of birds in migratory flight, but also the habitat of birds about which nothing or exceedingly little was known. He was a small, slightly built man, and so sharp of feature, bright of eye and alert of movement that the natives christened him the "Man-Bird," meaning thereby that so long had he been among birds that he had come to grow like one—an appellation which the scientist resented not at all, but regarded rather as a complimentary jest.

As in the case of the ethnologist, the natives knew not what to make of the bird-man. It puzzled them extremely that he should be at great pains to obtain birds, not to eat them, but merely to take their skins. It seemed to them utterly foolish that he should be at further pains still merely to watch a bird building its nest, or sitting on it, or feeding its young. It all seemed so wasteful and purposeless. But his skill as a hunter impressed them exceedingly. In the matter of stalking a bird he was more expert than they were. He could move through the jungle more silently than they could. He could more closely approach his quarry. They could remain motionless for long periods, but he could remain motionless for longer periods. With leaves and bushes he could so disguise himself that not even the most alert bird could distinguish him from a bit of the jungle. His bright eyes could detect the presence of a bird from an astonishing distance, and the merest glimpse of even a portion of its body was sufficient for him to determine its species and sex. The Man-Bird might be purposeless and wasteful, but of a truth he was a mighty hunter, said the

natives in effect and more than once made dance-songs of his skill.

There was a gold-pro prospector who made my house his headquarters while he examined the adjacent country for sign of auriferous deposits—without finding a payable one, however. A prospector of the tough old school, he was, a man well past middle-age, but sinewy and firm of muscle still; and each morning he would make up for himself a ration of flour and tea and sugar and a tin of meat, take his gold-dish and pick, buckle on a revolver, and set forth alone—sometimes to return with the setting of the sun, sometimes not to return till the following day, in which case I would be fearful for his safety, thinking he had been lost in the bush or maybe fallen foul of a wandering tribe of natives, and consider sending out a party to search for him. When he returned at such times he would remark casually that he had come across a likely bit of ground but had been unable to finish prospecting it that day, so had camped where he was till morning.

“No good making another tramp away there just to finish a bit of a job like that,” he would add in explanation.

Sleeping on the ground, entirely without cover of any kind, and in the midst of a wild and unknown land meant nothing to him at all.

A prospector all his life, he had been literally on hundreds of gold-fields. In the whole of Australia there was scarcely one he had not visited, and there were few in New Guinea and other of the South Sea Islands where he had not driven his pick. He knew gold-fields as another man might know towns. They were the main features of his geography. And his speech was so embellished with similes relating to “poppets,” and “winzes,” and “shafts,” and “ounces to the ton,” and

"fitchering," and "stamper-batteries," and other mining terms that the natives understood him hardly at all, and came to me asking if there were more kinds of the English language than one.

Financially his career had been a chequered one. For months, years, at a time he had made barely a living, upon occasion having not even sufficient food and of tobacco none at all, and hope his only prospect. Sometimes the hope was quite without justification, and the lean months would drag on interminably; but sometimes it would be gloriously justified, and gold would be his in abundance, gold in handfuls, in tinfuls, gold that he knew not where to put in safety till he could get it to a buyer or a bank, and which gave him great anxiety accordingly. A half-dozen times had he been a rich man, and a score of times one with sufficient to keep him for the rest of his life.

"But it went," he said, saying it without appearance of regret, but as though the spending of a hard-won fortune was inevitable in the game of life. "Booze, mostly. And women. What else is there for a feller to do who comes to city life after gord-knows-how-long in the bush? You know the old saying: 'Easy come, easy go.' It's no good tryin' to go agin them old sayin's." I wondered where the "easy come" came in.

He was fond of talking about his experiences. Unlike the ethnologist, he was a fountain of anecdote. Of an evening he would sit with me on the veranda and tell story after story, the while sucking desultorily at a much-blackened pipe, which more than half the time was out. Some of the stories were quite non-repeatable, being concerned with disgraceful amours in his times of riches, or with similarly disgraceful amours of his friends; but mostly they concerned happenings experienced in his gold-seeking. One was about his pushing a wheel-barrow,

loaded with tools and rations, to a Western Australian gold-field, he having no means of obtaining a horse—pushing it for more than three weeks, over two hundred miles of sand-dune country, where there was seldom a speck of shade, and all day long a red-hot, semi-tropical sun. Another was about a tombstone the miners of a small and isolated field obtained from the nearest town, engraved ready for erection, as a tribute to one of their number recently dead. On the day of its arrival the stone was accidentally broken in half and was therefore useless for the purpose intended; but it was not altogether wasted, for the man who baked for the camp used it as a floor for his oven; wherefore every loaf of bread baked in that camp was liable to bear portion of the inscription: Sacred to the Memory of William Smith.

Still another was about what he described as the most dreadful situation in which he had ever been.

“It was at Kalgoorlie—West Australia, y’ know,” he said. “Me and Big Roberts was mates. Y’ mightier heard of Big Roberts? No? Well known on all the fields. Well, we was doin’ well. Down twenty-five feet and gettin’ on to the real good gold; we could see it sticking out in lumps in places. One day we drilled the holes in the floor of the shaft, and I went to the surface and got the dynamite charges ready, and sent ’em down to Big in the bucket. He sent up the tools and charged the holes. I took off the windlass barrel, so’s to save it from the bits of flying rock. We always done that, and the feller below climbed a ladder we’d built up the side of the shaft. Well, Big seen that all the fuses was spittin’, and goin’ strong, then he started to climb. But when he got about half-way up, a lashing carried away and the ladder crashed down the shaft, and Big was thrown backwards down on to the stone floor.

“There he lay, stunned, on top of and between the
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smoking fuses. And here was me, shaking like a circus elephant, leaning down looking at him and unable to do a flamin' thing. I couldn't lower the rope, because the windlass barrel was unshipped, and there was no one to help me to put it on. A whole lot of wild schemes came into my head—but not one of 'em was any good. Nice sorter position for a man to be in! My mate layin' there on top of enough dynamite to blow him up so's he'd never come down again, and me nothin' to do but look at him, and at them fuses gettin' shorter and shorter. I never knew till then how quick a fuse could burn. They was racin'. Racin'. And there was poor old Big lyin' so peaceful like. I wanted to pray or somethin'. P'raps I did pray. I dunno.

"Anyway, I got a sorter inspiration. Near by was a bucket of water. I grabs it and empties it down the shaft, on top of Big's head. Big groans and sits up slowly, and wipes the water from his face and looks up and round wondering like. I chucked down my knife. 'Cut the fuses!' I roars. 'Cut 'em! Cut 'em! The fuses!' Big's wits comes back with a rush. He grabs the knife and snips 'em off—quite cool, though, no getting excited, or nothin'. He was just in time—the shortest was just disappearing down the collar of the hole when Big got to it. Another two seconds and the fire would have been below the surface, and then nothing would have stopped the row. I lowers the rope, and Big comes up hand over hand, and stands and looks at me and doesn't say nothin', and I looks at him and don't say nothin' either, like a pair of dummies. . . . He was a good bloke, Big."

Another visitor was an itinerant missionary, young and considerably inexperienced, but filled with a great and abiding optimism for the success of his work, who spent several evenings with my tribe in their camp, telling

them that their heathenish ways were the ways of error, and instructing them in the rudiments of the white man's religious belief. But it seemed to me that in this instance at least his optimism was not particularly well founded, for after he had gone the natives told me they had no intention of departing from their old and original ways, and said, further, that they doubted whether what he had told them was altogether true, the story of the creation of Eve being particularly hard to believe, it being clearly impossible, they said, to make a woman from the rib of a man, to say nothing of the fact that in the legends which had been handed down from their fathers and their fathers' fathers right back to the beginning of things there was no mention of such an occurrence. I looked forward to the return of that missionary with considerable interest, for it appeared that a full-dress debate would be staged on this and other matters. But the itinerary which involved a visit to Cape York was abandoned soon after his departure, and he never returned.

Sometimes soldiers from the garrison at Thursday Island would come over on furlough—come in a chartered cutter, in a sea-going motor-boat, in any available craft, a score or more of them at a time, all good fellows and gay, bringing with them abundance of drink and good foods, and for a space of maybe a fortnight so filling my solitude with sound of European speech and with companionship and merriment that when at length they departed it seemed to me that life had been emptied of its joys and desolation remained in its stead. There was nothing so forlorn, I thought, as a one-man dwelling suddenly deprived of its guests. At such times it came to me that I was more gregarious than I had thought.

Upon occasion various persons who cruised the coast in small craft would anchor off my beach and come ashore

for a "yarn." Most of them were coloured men, trepangers—Japanese, Indians, Cingalese, Kanaka half-castes—and it was the habit of each to bring me a present of fish, or of a piece of a turtle or a dugong he had caught, and squat on my veranda steps and tell of what boats he had seen and passed, and relate various happenings of which he had heard—such as that Jimmy the Dog was working the shore reef at Night Island for trepang and doing well; that Cingalese Sammy's cutter was ashore on a sandbank near the Cook Passage in the Barrier Reef; that old Bill Johnson had been attacked by natives as he lay at anchor at Breakfast Creek and shot two of them, and that the police-boat was on her way there to inquire into the affair. After which I would relate what news I had heard from the men of similarly calling boats, and present him with a bunch of bananas, or some sweet potatoes; and after a somewhat desultory talk he would go to the camp to gossip a while with the natives before boarding his craft and setting forth once more on his farming of the products of the sea.

The visit of one of these men—a somewhat stupid half-caste—ended in disaster. Being a stranger to the place, he anchored his cutter in the wrong spot, and right over a bed of strongly growing coral which so fouled the anchor that when he tried to heave it, it could not be moved. After various unsuccessful efforts, including the sending down of a naked native diver, he came ashore and appealed to me. I gave him a half-dozen plugs of dynamite and a fuse, told him to take one of the cane rings which held the sail to the mast, affix the dynamite to it, place it round the chain, which was straight up and down, light the fuse and let the affair go, the idea being that the ring, carrying the charge would slide down the chain, explode on the bottom and

thereby remove the obstructing coral. The half-caste thanked me and returned to his craft; and I watched from the veranda to see how the idea would work. Presently, there came an excited shouting, and cries of fear and consternation, and a general rushing back from the cutter's bows, and a jumping overboard of all hands; then there was the crackling crash of a surface explosion, and the cutter staggered and began to dip by the head and go down; and soon afterwards the half-caste, dripping wet, was standing on my veranda and more or less incoherently informing me he had not thought to attach a weight wherewith to sink the dynamite, wherefore the explosion had happened on the surface and blown the cutter's bow in. With the assistance of my tribe, the cutter was lifted from her place on the bottom, and repaired sufficiently to allow the half-caste to take her back to Thursday Island. He seemed reluctant about going, however. I think he thought that explosion a remarkably mild affair to the one which would happen when he told the whole story to his owners.

The actor
 Another of these men who in small craft sailed the coast was a European who spent all his spare time writing plays. He was a big, muscular individual, burned by sun and wind to the colour of an old penny, fifty years of age maybe, with a face so curiously thin that it seemed not to belong to him at all, but to some other person. Sitting on my veranda one still evening, he told me how he had come to take up play-writing. The hobby had been engendered by visits to theatres during his last sojourn in civilisation, some fifteen years before. It seemed so easy to write a play, he said. There was nothing in it at all. As he had sat in the theatre he felt he could write a better one than he was watching, without any trouble. And he would have stayed there in civilisation and done it, too, only that he had no means

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of sustenance in the meantime, his bit of money being almost done, and there were no jobs offering that he could see. Besides, he wasn't cut out for city life. Been too long in these far-away parts, knocking round in small boats and so forth. He had felt there was nothing to prevent a man writing plays up here. Nothing at all. He had plenty of time. A man in a small boat always had plenty of time. He'd written any number of plays. He'd written them for fifteen years. But so far he'd had no luck with them, though he'd sent them all over the place. There was scarcely a manager he hadn't sent one to at some time or another. It was hard to understand these managers. They were good plays. A damn' sight better than most of the rubbish that was staged. He'd read me a bit of one if I liked.

And he took from his pocket a number of sheets of paper covered with small, neat writing, stood directly beneath one of the gas-jets and began. It was a remarkable performance. Away there in the wilds, in an environment of jungle and palm-trees and sea, I was treated to as good an exhibition of semblanced emotions as ever I had witnessed in a theatre, or have witnessed since. He had an astounding facility for the expressing of passion, for giving subtlety to an aside, for heroic declamation. Very soon he threw down the papers and continued from memory. His modulations of tone were perfect. His characters were real characters, the conflict a real conflict, everything was vivid, true. That he was handicapped by having to play each of the parts himself, change from character to character, meant nothing. His thin face was transformed exactly at the right moment.

I thought it a wonderful play, and said so enthusiastically, and picked up the MS. that I might read it for myself. And then I received a disappointment. On

paper, the play was a wholly incredible thing—and almost incoherent. That man was not a playwright at all, but an actor, and the only one in the world who could have acted that play.

Another visitor was a youth, of twenty or less, who was adventuring his way round the world, journeying from job to job, staying long enough in one place to earn his fare to some other place, a bright-spirited young Englishman who revelled in life and the constant change which is the essence of life, delightfully improvident, thoroughly satisfied with the present, and carelessly regarding the future as a reservoir of pleasures to come.

And this despite that he was “up against it,” as he put it. He hadn’t been able to obtain a situation of any kind whatever in Thursday Island, and hearing of my plantation and thinking maybe I might employ him, he had spent his last pound on a passage across. He didn’t know what would happen to him, he replied when I asked what he would do if I didn’t employ him. He wasn’t worrying about it. Something would turn up. Something always did.

I had no particular need for another white man on the plantation, but I employed him for long enough to allow him to earn his fare to Thursday Island and across to New Guinea, from where he intended to work his way through Java and Timor and Malaya. It was not a matter of philanthropy. It was one of selfishness. For that young man was very much the kind of young man I used to be, and listening to his account of his varied wanderings recalled vividly my own wanderings and part-forgotten happenings, stirred memories of things which once had thrilled me, and in recalling them thrilled me once again. The hearing of his adventures gave me a

curiously ecstatic pleasure—and a somewhat eerie one besides. It was as though I were listening to someone telling me the story of my life. And when at length he departed, I thought a deal of where he might be, and pictured him sailing the New Guinea coast, and mingling with the crowded humanity of some Javanese seaport, and landing on a beach in Timor, and seeing some grand landscape from an inland Malayan hill, pictured him in all manner of places and adventures—and envied him.

Another visitor was a pearler friend who would come ashore for no particular reason, and stay ashore for three or four days, a week maybe, doing nothing save sitting on my veranda and reading novels, and his crew doing less, he having mixed so long with natives that he had become as casual as they and as regardless of the passing of time. Such idling would have made another man bankrupt long before, but this man flourished exceedingly, for the god of good fortune attended him always on his attacks of the pearling-beds, and he obtained more shells and pearls, and in a quarter the time, than any of the others did. A luck that seldom attends the idler was his, and it was his firm belief that nothing came of “busting yerself,” as he put it.

I had a call from some well-to-do people travelling the Coral Sea in a steamer they had chartered on a kind of Letters of Marque, people who in a wide, free wandering of the wild sought relaxation from the stress of civilised life, and who fell in love with the wildness and the freedom, and declared my existence an ideal existence, and my place and its environs wholly delightful and enviable, and I a person exceedingly fortunate in being able to live the kind of life they would willingly live if they could—all of which showed that besides finding the relaxation they sought, they had had awakened in

them for the time the primitive instinct which slumbers in all men no matter how civilised they may be.

The visit of these people was of great interest to my natives, for among them were three women, and the sight of European women was to them the rarest thing imaginable. Wherever those women went there was a group of natives near by, staring at them wonderingly, whispering comments on the fact that their manner of dressing concealed their bodies entirely, and on the fact that their hair was long—this a feature of more interest than any of the others—and remarking on the whiteness of their skins and the smallness of their feet. At first the white women were eager to make friends with the native women and talk with them, but these advances very soon discontinued, for the native women, in order to show their deep interest and friendliness, reciprocated by asking all manner of exceedingly intimate questions, taking no heed whatever than I, or some other white man, was present.

Another vessel that called in was a Chinese junk bound originally from Hong Kong to San Francisco to form an exhibit in an exposition there, but because of the persistence of bad weather and adverse winds, and because of the fact that the rig of the cumbersome craft was such that little or no progress could be made against the wind, was blown many hundreds of miles out of her course, sent on a chartless driving southwards down the Pacific, week after week, till at length it came to the North Australian coast, miraculously escaped the dangers of the Barrier Reef, and finally came to anchor off my house.

On board were five people—a white man, his Chinese wife and three adult Eurasian sons, all of them emaciated from privation and general hardship, and the woman ill besides. Their only food for weeks, they told me, was

a fish or two they had managed to catch, and for the last few days the menace of thirst had confronted them, for until they sighted my house they had been too afraid of hostility from natives, whose smokes they had seen continually, to go ashore and search for a stream.

I relieved their necessity as best I could and tended the woman to recovery—a circumstance due mainly to the strength of her constitution, my ignorance of medicine being enormous—and in due course they went to Thursday Island, where the junk was sold and the people who had so perilously voyaged in her took steamer back to Hong Kong. I thought that was the end of them so far as I was concerned. But it wasn't, for I have ever since received at irregular intervals a postcard bearing from the man a message of greeting and remembrance, with at the bottom a scrawl by his wife in the Chinese character, which, I'm told, is expression of affection and regard.

I had a visit from a writer-man—a world-touring American journalist, who in due course published in various English and United States papers articles descriptive of my life in the wilds, my plantation, and myself—the last in such complimentary terms that, reading them, I was amazed to discover what a remarkable young person I was—and as a result of this publicity all manner of persons wrote me from all manner of places, and in a vein which showed that the age of adventure was far from being dead.

I had a letter from a man at Toronto, Canada, stating that he was “tired to death of cold countries, and longed for the sun,” and asking would I mind “arranging with the natives for a bit of land.” A youth at Boston declared his intention of coming to my part of the world as soon as he was of age and could therefore ignore the opposition of his parents, and querying hopefully if the

natives were really dangerous. A Portland hotel-clerk asked if I needed a book-keeper, and stated that if I didn't, he would be willing to serve in any capacity whatever—"the wild-man life is the life for me," he said in paraphrase—and a gentleman of the same town told me I was foolish to take such risks with my life by living in such a remote and unsettled spot. A pious lady informed me she was considerably grieved to note that in all she had read about me, there was no mention of my attending to the "soul-welfare of the dear natives."

From Yorkshire, England, I had a conjoint letter from a young man and his wife asking would I mind giving full details regarding coconut-growing in my part of the world, and if they could obtain some land with a "beach like yours, and near by a green hill with a stream at its foot." From Edinburgh came a photograph of a lassie in a kilt—"perhaps looking at me on those long, quiet nights will cheer you," was inscribed on the back. A shop girl at Leeds offered to send a photograph and to enter into a regular correspondence. A lady school-teacher in London wrote that she "thought it *so* romantic that a young man should be living alone among the wild savages of North Australia," and sent me a copy of the school magazine—why, I don't know. A young Londoner who confessed to being a hairdresser and thoroughly tired of it, asked if it were at all possible I could employ him—"I would cook, or scrub floors, or anything," he wrote, adding, "I find it costs a good deal to get out to you, but if you would advance the fare, you could take it out of my wages," and adding further that he had never been ill in his life, "except for a bit of a cough I've got," that he was five feet four in height, "but fairly broad."

And there were the kindly members of a Chicago Society for the Dissemination of Literature who sent me a piano-

case filled with books of all kinds, and a long letter in which it was hoped the books would be a treasure and delight to me, that they would do something towards materially relieving "your great and lonely solitude."

I appreciated those books immensely. So many of them were there that my large room was transformed into a library. Indeed, no gift could have been more to my liking, and for the kindly members of that society I have entertained ever since a warm and profound affection.

But "lonely solitude!" If only they had known how crowded was my solitude!

CHAPTER X

THE WILDING THAT WAS ME

At the end of the eighth year it came to me I should take a holiday—nothing extensive or of any great duration, just a week or two's jaunt somewhere, just a week or two's freedom from the cares and routine of the agricultural life. The plantation was now a thoroughly accomplished fact. Where once had been only the purple tangle of a jungle was now the green of palms in ordered array—palms so prodigal of foliage that they were as sprouting fountains of fronds, palms so opulent in their fructivity that the grey of the soil about their bases was dotted always with the brown of ripened, fallen nuts. I felt I deserved a holiday. I had done what I had set out to do.

So it was that in due course I appointed Billy Number Five manager in my stead, bade gay farewell to the natives—and received sorrowful farewell in return, particularly from Mary Brown and Fitzherbert—sailed in a visiting lugger to Thursday Island and there took passage in a steamer across the Gulf of Carpentaria's wide mouth to Port Darwin—the capital of the Northern Territory of Australia.

I chose Port Darwin as the scene of my holiday partly because it was conveniently near, being distant only a three days' sail, and partly because it was a place to which I had never been, but mainly because it was something as strange in the way of tropical places as was Cape York without its coconut-palms. For, Port Darwin was a tropical place where white men predominated,

where white men performed almost the whole of the manual tasks, where white men had taken it upon themselves to prove that they were as well suited as black men to lands of Equatorial suns. In various tropics I had seen white men at manual labouring—miners in New Guinea, some railroad navvies in Malaya, some impecunious beach-combers in Java helping natives with the building of a stone wall of a canal. But these instances were so few that sociologically they meant nothing at all. In the sugar country of Queensland white men had lived and worked thus for a generation or more; but that sugar country was not so tropical as Port Darwin. The experiment at Port Darwin was the first real experiment of a whole community of whites living and working in a real tropics; and I was interested to discover how it was shaping. As a Man with a Stake in the Country, it was natural I should be interested in such things.

But before I reached Port Darwin this interest faded. A feeling came to me that I would like to journey on a little farther than I had intended. The steamer in which I travelled was a China steamer, with a Chinese name and a Chinese crew and a number of Chinese passengers who squatted on the for'rd deck and played fantan, and sucked great bamboo pipes and ate fish and rice from dexterously manipulated chop-sticks. In my wilding days I had seen in China innumerable scenes like that, and desire to see them there again was mine. Further, among the European passengers were men who knew people I knew at Hong Kong and Shanghai and Honan, and we spoke much about them; and I thought how fine it would be to be with those friends again, and that it would give me great pleasure indeed to once more be aboard a wandering cargo-steamer threading the sanpan traffic of the Shanghai river, going nowhere in particular and re-

turning when I wished; and I recalled with a thrill that Hong Kong was but ten days from Port Darwin; and only with an effort told myself I must put such thoughts ruthlessly from me, that I had long ago shed desire for irresponsible wandering, that I was a Settled and Respectable Person, a Planter, and a Man of Affairs.

We came into harbour with the first of a dawn odorous of jungles and beaches, and at sunrise made fast to a jutting wharf at the foot of a town such as never I had seen before. For, Darwin stood on a plateau, eighty or more feet high—a steep plateau draped with the green and purple of a riot of indigenous flora, with way of access a series of winding steps cut deep in the plateau's wall—steps edged by flowering trees and coloured shrubs and hibiscuses red like blood—and houses stood about the edge of that great height—small, straggling houses perched precariously like daring impatient children; and groups of larger houses which stood back a little and looked down upon the harbour and the ships, politely curious; and houses which stared dully in rows, their windows like strangely expressionless eyes. As I went ashore and mounted the foliaged ladder of stone which gave access to a town, I felt as though those houses had come forth to watch me and wonder at the reason of my coming.

Port Darwin was not much of a town as towns go, being a straggling kind of a place, with streets which wandered untidily nowhere in particular, save to somewhere in the bush, with four or five hotels of sorts, a scattering of shops, a thoroughly insanitary Chinese quarter, and an undue number of dwellings built of that most unsuitable material for tropical houses—corrugated galvanised iron. But I enjoyed my first sight of it immensely. It was a place where were congregated far more people of my own skin than I had seen for eight

full years. It was to me a place of great busyness, of comings and goings extraordinary; there were motor-cars, and even railway trains. It was a place filled with civilised sights and sounds which to me had for so long been only memories.

I thought I could stay there indefinitely. I thought it would be long indeed before my interest was exhausted. There was the matter of how this settling a tropical land with whites was progressing. There were planters to visit and talk with on subjects like fruiting-times, the advantages of red loam as compared with black mould, the uses and abuses of fertilisers. There were new people to be met each day, new sights to see, new things to hear.

But I tired of it in a week. By that time I had lost all desire to talk fertilisers and loam, and the new people were new no longer, and the new sights stale, while as for the experiment of white settlement I noted that the people seemed remarkably healthy and the children among the finest I had seen, and let it go at that. Port Darwin was right enough in its way; but I had had enough of it. I wanted some other place—any place. Desire was once more upon me to wander in many places.

In this mood I received invitation to accompany some of my new friends in a small auxiliary craft a hundred and fifty miles or so down the coast of Arnheim's Land—that is to say, the great unknown land which forms the western shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria. It would be a leisurely wandering from place to place, they said, anchoring every day or two, staying ashore an hour, a day, a week, any old time at all.

I promptly accepted. A wandering like this was just what I craved. It reminded me of my Odyssey of New Guinea, the Solomons, Torres Strait, of the days when I was in turn trader, gold-seeker, pearler, recruiter of plantation labourers, of the times that were mine before

the urge came upon me to settle a while. It would do me good to drift about for a week or two. All the good in the world. It would make me all the gladder to return to being a Settled and Respectable Person, make me absolutely contented with the agriculturist's life.

We left on a day as clear and sparkling and lovely as a gem—some wondrous cosmic gem—a day which ended with a sunset even more lovely still. It was an evening filled with daintiness and small prettinesses, with little aimless breezes which gave to the sea a quick irregular crinkling, and in the north a scattering of white and lazy clouds, and in the west an arch of subtle blue through which the sun went down and down and down clean-edged like a plate. But just as the rim of it touched the clear-cut line of the water, the lazy clouds lost their laziness and came hurrying—small clouds and large clouds, clouds thin like hints of smoke, clouds that were as great rolls of superfluous fat, clouds that moved with dignity, clouds that went gaily like urchins; and as they reached the place of the departed sun, they stayed there and joined one to another and formed into grottoes and castles and wide fields; and the whiteness of them gave place to reds like the reds of oranges and yellows like the yellows of new gold; and the quick crinkling of the sea was a wideness of little lapping flames. Then the grottoes and castles and wide fields mingled and made of the west a mighty golden gateway banked with bronze; and through the gateway showed the spires and turrets of a city built of precious stones, and beyond the city a plain of silver. And there for a space of minutes the gateway and the city stood, all lit with rare, slow lights, and the brightness of the silver plain growing to the brightness of glass. Then the new gold dulled to old gold and the reds to paling pinks, and the city and its plain became no more,

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and the mighty gateway crumbled and its banking of bronze dissolved, and the grey of the night crept up. The pageant of the sky was done. But I saw still that gateway and that city and that plain, and was filled with a surge of emotion and the pull of a strange unrest, and for long just stood there, staring; and one of my friends said quietly: "It was the gateway to Kingdom Come."

That journey was much like journeys I had made in my wilding days. It overflowed with variety. Never were there a few hours the same as any other few hours. In the morning we would sail passages where tides raced like flooded rivers, and in the afternoon lie along winding beaches where crocodiles we had thought were bits of driftwood went clumsily to the water at sound of our engine's beat. One midday we would be standing up to the bluster of head-seas which swept us end to end, and the next making a wide and oily wake up a river smooth as glass. One night we would lie at anchor in a harbour so steeply deep that the vessel sat upright against the shore as it might have sat upright against a wharf, and the next night perhaps stick on a seaward sandbank and have to get out and push.

We were gloriously and delightfully indolent, and none was more indolent than I was, for in the busyness of my life as a planter I had forgotten that indolence had its completely satisfying joys, and the re-discovering of those joys thrilled me through. Never did we do anything if we could help it, and sometimes didn't do it even then. Never were we clad other than in pyjamas, or in a singlet and shorts; never did we desire to be otherwise clad. At night as we sailed along we lay about the deck and "yarned" about anything and everything, from horse-racing and war to books and women, while the skipper ambidexterously steered with one hand and with the other

balanced a pannikin of rum, and, in his turn, told tales of wild happenings in the great, unknown land whose coast we sailed; and later we would lie part-awake, listening to the look-out native chanting some camp-fire ditty and thereby letting the skipper know he was not asleep, but keeping diligent watch.

We were perfectly irresponsible. Time, distance and place meant to us nothing. We went anywhere we wished to go. Sometimes we went ashore for a half-day and shot wild pigs and ducks and pigeons and turkeys and other game. Sometimes we drag-netted a beach for fish. The sea was burdened with fish; at one place we gathered in a single haul more than half a ton—and had a three days' task repairing the net. Sometimes we spent a morning gathering oysters, which were as plentiful as the fish; indeed, I had never seen a place so abundant with them; at certain places the low tides uncovered them by the acre.

*Native of
Lunheim Land*
Natives were scarce; but whenever we saw a camp-fire in an accessible spot we anchored and went ashore to it. The people were a wild and savage lot—as wild and savage as were my tribe at Cape York when first I went there. But there was about their savagery a curious touch of civilisation, for Malays from Macassar and from Java had for centuries come here in their praus in search of sandalwood and cedar and cypress and trepang and pearl-shell, coming at the end of one trade-wind season and returning with the beginning of the next, thereby having a favouring wind each way—a matter of great importance to a craft so ill-suited to head-winds as a prau.

Each year they came, whole fleets of them, and each time they stayed for several months, employing the natives when they could, mingling with them, using their women, by virtue of association instilling into them something

of the civilisation which was theirs—which though by no means an advanced civilisation was nevertheless thousands of years ahead of the natives' mode of existence.

So it was that these natives as I found them were often semi-oriental of feature, and were possessed of hair long and straight instead of short and crinkly, and had in the dull blackness of their skins a queer hint of yellow, and in their language and place-names Malayan words. Further, most had learned to smoke opium and to love it to such extent that they beseeched us for it upon every occasion, and only with an air of dissatisfaction took tobacco instead.

They told stories of those Malays and their doings—dreadful stories, most of them; there were stories of orgies in which liquor and native girls were prominent features, and stories of women stolen and taken to Java or Macassar, never to return, and stories of the warriors of the tribes to whom the women belonged avenging themselves on the stealers when they came again the next year—one such avenging resulted in the slaying and mutilating of a prau's whole crew with a savagery apparently wholly unnecessary, and the account of it was given me by a man who had taken a principal part in the raid. I have never seen the eyes of a man so resemble the eyes of a wild beast as did the eyes of that man as he related the details of the surprising of the prau. Nor have I heard anything so realistically horrible as his imitating of the cries of the Malays, and his slow intaking of breath to indicate the passage of a spear through human flesh, and the curious grinding noise he made with his teeth in the semblancing of bones grinding beneath club-blows viciously repeated.

The difference between these people and the Cape York people interested me immensely. I had not expected to

find differences of habit and custom among members of the same race. So long had I been accustomed to one tribe, or set of tribes, that I had come to thinking all other tribes must be as they. Eight years' residence in one place had made me parochial, had made my outlook something resembling that of the man who from living all his life in a small and unimportant town judges the rest of the world by the standards of that same small and unimportant town. My discovery of this unsettled me still further, and I asked myself that if in eight years I could become so parochial, what dreadful kind of a person would I be in sixteen years, or twenty-four years. Thought of living away there in the wilds of Cape York for all that time appalled me.

The dancing of these natives was not at all like that of the Cape York natives. Instead of being about nothing in particular, and more or less impromptu, it was imitative of the prancing of birds, or of fights between animals. One I saw was representation of a battle between two reptiles—iguanas.

It was on a coastal island a fortnight's sail from Port Darwin—a large island with a fragment of beach and the rest of it littoral mud and mangroves and oyster-beds—and at the time of our coming there was on the fragment of beach no one at all. But presently from the two-miles distant mainland came numbers of bark canoes considerably overladen, and we were surrounded by a mostly-nude crowd who said in their curiously part-Malayan tongue that they had seen our sail and come to know if we had any opium, and that if we had they would have on the beach that night a dance. They exhibited the usual dissatisfaction when we gave them tobacco instead, and gave us to understand that they didn't believe we had no opium, and hung round hoping we would produce some at length, and finally announced that they would

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give the dance anyway, and if afterwards we cared to give them some of the drug—well, we could, and that in any case some tobacco and flour would be acceptable.

The setting and general circumstances of that dance were similar to many others I had seen; there were the usual circle of illumining fires, the drum-like chanting of the men, the usual falsetto screeching of the women. But in point of strenuousness and general agility it stood alone. In the centre of the ring of fires some two-score men, their faces and bodies smudged with red and yellow clay, formed a circle, in the midst of which stood the two principals of the dance; men bigger than the rest they were, tall, big-muscled, their bearing the bearing of athletes; and for a time there was a general chattering and disordered movement. Then suddenly an extremely disreputable old person squatted on the ground in a prominent position, raised to his lips a long bamboo tube and, blowing, produced a short, drum-like note, and the chattering gave place to an abrupt silence, and the members of the painted circle stopped, hands on knees, and the two principals similarly painted knelt facing each other, their tongues out in imitation, I was told, of an iguana in a temper, and two fingers of each hand raised upright to represent claws.

Then the disreputable old person blew another short note, and began a series of jerky and exceedingly discordant sounds; and the onlookers beat their hands against their sides and chorussed a resonant chant; and the imitation iguanas began their fighting, charging one another at full speed, missing by narrow margins, wheeling, flanking, leaping backward with astonishing agility, feinting, prancing, hissing, shouting and screaming, dementedly locking one another in their arms, rolling in an entwined mass of struggling limbs, continuing it for an hour or

more, never once pausing for breath, the fact that all this strenuousness was performed in the kneeling position in soft loose sand being no apparent hindrance, and all of it strangely rhythmical besides. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped, and the singers and the old person with the tube came and begged tobacco, and one of the dancers explained to us at considerable length that the dance would have continued much longer, only that the clay on the dancers' faces had become mingled with perspiration and formed a sticky mess which obscured their sight. So far as I could understand it, the dance ended in a draw.

Day after day we made our wandering way, seeing nothing of ships, meeting no one save natives—and then but rarely—with on one side always the wide emptiness of the sea, and on the other the green and brown spread of the land, and ahead an island, or a jutting-point, or a river-mouth, where we might anchor, or might not anchor, just as we were inclined, but where for sure there would be change of scene and circumstance. Never did we know what we might find. Once, for instance, we sailed into a perfectly sheltered harbour, which our chart of sorts said was called Port Essington, and found on its shore the ruins of an old-time attempt to settle with whites this wild and savage land—the ruins of a town called Victoria, which more than eighty years before had been built by soldiers and convicts from Van Dieman's Land, and after ten years abandoned.

The ruins were mostly those of stone and brick dwellings and fortifications and a prison, the bricks having been made on the spot, and the stone quarried from a hill-side close by; and the whole of it was example of how Nature can recover its own, for among the rows of broken chimneys were tall trees and jungle growths, and what once were streets were now the standing-places of masses

THE WILDING THAT WAS ME

of indigenous foliage. A little while before our coming, a native, needing bark for a hut, had stripped some trees growing between the roofless walls of what once had been the drawing-room of Government House!

In a hollow back from the town a little we found the burying-place of those of these high-spirited adventurers who gave their lives to this attempt to create the first white-man settlement in this *terra incognita* of a tropics. Their graves were covered with weeds and bushes and their deeds forgotten long since. But their names were more or less perpetuated on the tombstones. As the inscriptions were becoming undecipherable, Authority, some ten years before our visit, sent someone to reinscribe them—someone illiterate, I take it, as these examples show:

SACREAD
TO THE MEMEORY
OF CAPTIN CRAWFORD
47 RIGMENT HOBART
DIED PORT ESSINGTON
1838—1848

And:

HOSPITAL
1838—ERECED—1848
BY MEN OF 47 RIGMENT

Visitors are requested not to look for relics.

Visitors!—and we the first to call at that place since those words were inscribed ten years before!

I gloried in the freedom of those days, in the lack of routine, in the indefiniteness of our daily destinations, and in the fact that I was always going somewhere and that when I came to a place I was not bound to remain in it for long; and all the while it seemed to me stranger and stranger that I should have been content to remain

in one place through eight full years. I wondered how on earth I could have done it.

"You must have got dead tired of it at times," remarked the vessel's skipper, who was an adventurer such as I had been; and from his tone I gathered he thought me a very queer person indeed. "It wouldn't have done me! I don't reckon I would have been able to stand it—stuck away there by myself!"

As the vessel headed back for Port Darwin, I was given much to wondering whether I would be able to "stand it" again. That life on the plantation, once so delightful and satisfying, was delightful and satisfying no longer. The instinct of the wilding which I had told myself was dead, had but drowsed, and now was thoroughly awake. I was tired of being a Settled and Respectable Person. Thought of seeing the same scenes and people day after day, for months, years, many years, appalled me. I couldn't face a future like that. There was about it too much monotony and immobility, to say nothing of responsibility. I wanted frequent change, and mobility, and irresponsibleness. I wanted to be a wanderer again, an adventurer in many places, instead of in one place. The urge to settle a while had been satisfied and now was utterly dead.

At Darwin a Japanese steamer lay at the wharf. The mud of Java was on her anchors, and men of Nippon walked her deck. I would have liked to take passage in her, to go with her whither she was bound—it didn't matter where. I had sufficient money. But I couldn't go. There was the plantation. Already I was past my time for returning. Things at the plantation would be all upside-down if I didn't return at once. I met some cattle-drovers about to set out for Boorooloola. I could have gone with them. This place with all the o's in its name was said to be the most out-back town in Australia



BOOROOLOOLA.

and one of the smallest in the world, as it consisted only of an hotel and a store. There would be all manner of adventures on the way. But I couldn't go. There was the plantation. There was always the plantation, and on present appearances there would always *be* the plantation.

I damned the plantation, telling myself I had been a fool to hamper myself with a thing like that, and that a man's possessions were nothing more than restrictions upon his liberty of action. Besides, I was no agriculturist, no earth-bound son of the soil. My desire to plant things and see them grow was but a transient phase. I was a roamer, and nothing but a roamer.

In this condition of mind I returned to Thursday Island and crossed the Strait to Cape York and to my old familiar scenes—and received such welcome from the tribe and Mary Brown and Fitzherbert and Billy Number Five as to cause me to wonder how I could leave them for ever, should opportunity arise. I looked at the tree which bore my initials and the date of my coming to the solitudes, and thought of the exulting which was mine when I cut those letters and figures. I looked at the buoyant young palm which was the first to fruit, the palm which had been to me more a child than was Fitzherbert, and I looked at the other palms, the thousands of them, and thrilled to the knowledge that I was the agent of their being. Never, I thought, would I find it in me to abandon all this. This place I had made and its associations were too personal, too much a part of the thing that was me. To give it all up would be like giving up a part of myself.

But when, some time later, a good price was offered me for my share in it all, I was far from being so sure. A confusion of desire was mine, and a confusion of thought. I saw myself journeying to the places to which I would

MY CROWDED SOLITUDE

journey were I free of the restriction of possessions. I saw myself happy and content down the years in this place of mine. I wanted to go, and I wanted to stay, and knew not which to do. To the offer I made an indeterminate reply. The price was increased.

And then the wanderlust welled up in me, strongly, insistently, and grew to a tidal wave which drowned all other thought, flooded all other desire, washed clear away the dead debris of the urge which had caused me to settle at all. The wilding that was ME would not be denied. I accepted the price—and set forth on my wanderings once more.

